Fate/Zero

Volume 4

Flames of Purgatory

Nasu Kinoko
Urobuchi Gen

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First Edition

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Original Translation
Baka-Tsuki / www.baka-tsuki.org

Editing & Publication
kureshii / kureshii@gmail.com

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Interlude

Sometime, somewhere

"Kerry, you do know the origin of this island's name, right?" Shirley asked, leisurely handling the creaking car's steering wheel. The boy called Kerry, sitting in the passenger's seat, shook his head and forced a "not really," afraid that the vehicle's intense shaking would cause him to him bite his tongue.

The pick-up truck they were driving was seemed to hail from a time when coaches were just declining in use. Moreover, the road they were driving on now was not a paved bitumen road but a dirt road; even an ox-cart would have to slow down on these roads. Right now, it felt like a small boat tossing on the sea during a storm.

The vehicle, looking like a piece of junk about to go out of service, was one of three or four precious vehicles on Arimago Island. Here, in a fishing village with about three hundred families, need of a car was uncommon enough. Those whose livelihoods would be troubled without a vehicle were probably just Kerry's family and Shirley, the maid who did the housework. To

reach the house, far from the fishing village, there was truly no other means of transport but this worn-out truck.

"Arimago . . . does it mean giant crab?"

Shirley nodded and answered the boy's question. "A long, long time ago, this island was where offerings to be presented to a deity of the sea were stored. But once, a girl had nothing to feed her sick mother and had to steal those offerings. Divine retribution struck her, and she was changed into a crab."

"It's a terrible story."

"After that, it was said that if you ate a crab caught on this island, it would cure any disease. The girl's mother recovered from her long illness as well."

"That's even worse. It's such an outrageous sea deity!"

"However, folktales such as these, written on tapestry and other media, are not rare. They can be found all over the world."

"Um, does the shrine where people sacrificed to this deity still exist?"

"It disappeared a long time ago. Besides, no one knows whether it really did exist. According to the myth, it seems to have been built right next to where your mansion now stands."

"So the girl who was turned into a crab actually made her way to the heart of this deep jungle, so far away, just to steal the offerings? It would have been much more convenient to just catch some fish at the beach instead."

"That myth is the reason why people of the village would not get close to your house. Legends say it's an ominous place, and you'll be cursed if you go near it too often. I've been warned of it as well."

"But how! . . . Then what about me, who lives there?"

"You're fine, because you're a foreigner. But even then, don't the people at the village see you as my little brother?"

That did not make Kerry feel completely relieved. But unlike his father, who never stepped outside the house, Kerry had to help Shirley with the shopping. They rode in the truck to the village every day.

It had been almost a year since he moved to this island. The island's inhabitants greeted him warmly when they saw him. Even the other boys of the village, who used to fight with him on sight, now conspired with him in playing pranks on the other villagers. Although he was in a strange place far from his homeland, Kerry liked Arimago Island very much. Though the first weeks after his move were extremely boring, the dazzling southern sun and multi-colored sparkling waves of the southern ocean had gradually captured Kerry's heart. However, his father, who never approached anyone and never stepped out of the house at all, found it hard to see any delight.

"If Father would communicate more with the people at the village, he would surely change . . ."

"Mmm, who knows?" Steering skilfully to dodge large rocks jutting out of the road, Shirley smiled bitterly. "Father Simon never liked your father's actions, and he often lectured me, saying that sooner or later, I'd be ensnared by the devil if I worked in that house again."

". . . I see." Kerry could not help feeling a little downhearted on hearing that Father Simon, who always seemed to be so gentle, would judge his father in such a way behind his back. But it could

not be helped. Rather, he was relieved that the comments only went that far. Father Simon would surely expel both father and son from this small island if he knew the truth about the things his father did.

Shirley tapped a silver short sword harnessed at her lower back, and motioned at Kerry.

"Father Simon forced me to take it, and told me never to part with it. He said it's a very useful talisman."

"... Isn't this the knife you always use to peel fruits?"

"Mmm, it is is very sharp and easy to use. It must be something very precious." Shirley continued to speak calmly. The topic had not dampened her mood.

"Aren't you afraid, Shirley? Aren't you afraid of my father?" Kerry asked hesitantly. Shirley nodded decisively.

"I understand your father isn't normal, and based on his behavior it's not unreasonable for the villagers to be guarded toward him. But considering the kind of research he does, it was inevitable that he had to leave the city and seclude himself on such a remote island. Your father really is an impressive man."

Kerry noticed that for some reason, Shirley suddenly became mature and sensible whenever they talked about his father. She was only four years his senior; she should not have matured as much as an adult yet.

"Any one of his discoveries is immense enough to change the world entirely. This is reasonable cause for fear, and anyone would be scared to know of such things, so it would naturally be kept secret. But I really do believe such powers can help this world greatly. I've always firmly believed so."

"... Can such things really be possible?"

"He may have given it up already. But Kerry, I believe you can definitely be successful!"

Her expression was dead serious. Instead, the boy replied disappointedly. "What do you mean? Aren't you Father's favorite pupil, Shirley? Wouldn't you be the one to take it up in future?"

Shirley, who often went to his house, did not only do domestic chores such as tidying the house, but also assisted Kerry's father in his work. His father once said of Shirley that she possessed exceptional intelligence and talent, and leaving her on this lone island was a waste. That a man who always obeyed the creed of secrecy would trust an unfamiliar woman this much said much about Shirley's talent. But Shirley herself laughed loudly and shook her head.

"I am in no way a pupil; only an assistant at best, one who does odd jobs and lends a hand. Therefore, I know nothing of the important aspects. But Kerry, you're different. You will definitely succeed your father's business. One day, you will have to carry on the research your father is doing now. Are you prepared for it? ... Well, I guess it is a little early for you to think about such things."

Shirley said it earnestly, like a real sister worrying about her little brother. For one moment, the boy could not speak, halted by the complicated sentiments in his heart. He had no memories of his mother, who passed away right after he was born. For the boy, his so-called family consisted only of his father. Although his father was eccentric and very strict, he was a very gentle and great father, whom the boy respected and loved most. As such, he was greatly dismayed to find that his father, his most admired, favored

an assistant over his own son. At one point, he even felt enmity for Shirley. But Shirley's cheerful temperament and gentle attitude unknotted this enmity, and it did not last long.

They seemed to have had a new member in the family. Shirley respected the boy's father as her own, and looked after the boy as her real little brother. For the boy, who had no female relatives, the words 'older sister' far surpassed the meaning they originally possessed. Perhaps it was not exaggerated at first, but recently such strange feelings had taken root in the boy's heart. He knew of Shirley's gentleness, cheerfulness, and virtue well. But even her unconscious gestures—such as the way she handled the steering wheel while humming—appeared so beautiful. Why was that?

"Kerry, what kind of a man would you like to be? And if you succeeded your father's work, how would you like to use it?"

"... Eh?" The absentminded boy was suddenly dragged back into reality by Shirley's question.

"Someday, you will obtain power to change the world."

It would be a lie to say he had never thought about his father's inheritance. The boy understood its value and significance completely, not to mention its use. But he was hesitant to put it in words himself, particularly in front of Shirley. He did not want others to tell him his dream was naïve, and above all he did not want to hear it from Shirley.

"... That's a secret."

"Mmm?" Shirley laughed knowingly. "Then I'll see with my own eyes what you wish to do when you grow up. I'll be right beside you until I get an answer. How's that?"

"... If you like." Feeling somewhat ashamed, the boy turned his eyes away. Still, the smile of a girl far too much like an older sister was too dazzling for him.

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Her skin was white as wax, and the popping blue-black veins split her skin into shards. Her face was anguished, like one near death. She was about to die, and in her last throes. A human with such an expression will soon cease to be human; the boy understood this clearly.

It was night outside, and there were no street lights on the island. The chilly white light of the bright and pure moon silently illuminated the tragic scene through the window. This was a henhouse on the edge of the village. Searching for Shirley, who had suddenly disappeared without reason, the boy had treaded every inch of the village during the day, and had not given up even at night. Then he found his way here, saw the half-eaten carcasses of the chickens, and felt Death shivering and crying deep inside the henhouse.

Kill me—Death, wearing the face of the woman he loved, begged him in sobs. The short silver sword thrown near his feet shone cold and pale in the moonlight.

I'm terrified; I can't do it myself—please, kill me ... while there's still time—

"How could I ..." Shaking his head, the boy drew back. *I cannot do it. No matter what you have turned into, you are still Shirley. We promised to be together forever. You are an*
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important family member—no, even more important than a family member!

Please—Shirley panted painfully. Her sounds grew maddening. She sobbed sorrowfully, panting like a hungry beast.

It's already—over—quick, before I completely lose control of myself—like a malaria victim, Shirley's body started to tremble uncontrollably. With a sudden movement, she bit into her wrist.

Spurt … spurt … the sound of blood assaulted the boy's eardrums. *Please*—The persistent sound of begging drowned out the boy's tragic wails. He ran out of the henhouse. What terrified him more than the sight of Shirley was the light reflecting from the short sword beside his feet. He did not know what had happened, and he did not want to understand. All he prayed for was to have someone save them. he firmly believed someone would release him from this nightmarish terror. Shirley would surely be saved; someone was going to save them; the boy kept repeating to himself.

It would take five minutes to run to Father Simon's church, as fast as his feet could take him. He ran for his life, crying, the pain in his feet and the anguish in his chest no longer registering in his mind.

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Natalia Kaminski—that was what she said her name was. She wore an inky black long coat, very inappropriate for a tropical night, but she showed no sign of sweating. Her pale countenance was more expressionless than cold and cruel. One would doubt if
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blood flowed in her, and question if she had any trace of body heat. Such was the appearance of she who saved the boy from the ravages of pandemonium.

"All right, kid. It's time you answered a few questions for me."

With his back turned to her cold voice, the boy only stared transfixed at the distant fishing village which was burning to the ground. That village, still slumbering under the silent moonlight just hours ago, so peaceful until yesterday, was now lit by flames. Unable to believe the scene before his eyes, the boy only perceived it all as a nightmare. He would never see those familiar, gentle faces in the village again—never again?

"What exactly . . . happened?" The boy asked drily. Natalia snorted. "I was the one who asked first. Boy, isn't it time to get back to your senses?"

The boy suddenly turned his head around. Even if he owed her his life, it annoyed him that she would ignore the feelings of others, would not answer his questions, and went on and on with her own questions instead. After an obstinate silence, Natalia seemed to have grasped his thoughts. Letting out a helpless sigh, she explained briefly.

"There are two groups jointly responsible for the tragedy in that village. One of them is the Executors of the so-called Holy Church, completely unlike the nice priests you know. They are cruel fellows who believe that all who betray God are to be killed. Naturally, they would mercilessly eliminate anything like a vampire on sight. If time did not permit individual inspection of the vampire's victims, they would simply destroy everything. That was what happened here.

"The other group is called the Association. This is a bit difficult to explain—they're a group that seeks sole possession of fantastic things like vampires. Naturally, sole possession involves killing others who know the relevant details; destruction of evidence and concealment of the truth is fruitless if not carried out thoroughly. You've got fine luck, kid. You're probably the only inhabitant of this island right now who managed to survive their purge."

The boy accepted this fact more easily than Natalia had expected. He seemed to have discerned their reason for coming to Arimago Island long before. He rushed to Father Simon to seek help, and the priest in turn made contact with other people. Someone outside the island must have intercepted this intelligence in transit. The sequence of events notwithstanding, the beginning of this tragedy was inextricably linked to himself. Had he listened to Shirley's supplication, taken courage, and plunged the silver white short sword into the chest of his beloved, this tragedy could have been avoided. Had he done that, even at the cost of his soul or of peaceful nights of rest, he could have saved all these lives. To the boy, he might as well have been the one who set the place on fire.

"... Which side are you on?"

"I'm like a saleswoman for the Association. My job is to seek out secrets they are interested in, to prevent anyone else from finding out about them, and to bring it into their hands. Of course, it has to be done before it gets out of hand. This can't be sold now." Natalia shrugged her shoulders, seemingly accustomed to such happenings. Perhaps this familiarity would explain the smell of death on her body.

"All right, boy. Let's get back to the previous question. It's about time for you to answer my question. This so-called Sealing Designation—do you know what it means? Also, where is the evil magus, the culprit of this vampire incident, hiding on this island? Do you know?"

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Those words, too deep for the boy, were in fact part of the truth. Kerry was not his real name. He, born in a foreign, remote country, had a name too hard to pronounce for the local inhabitants. It was Shirley who abbreviated his name to Kerry, a habitual name quickly picked up by the villagers. He too felt this name to be much friendlier.

His real name is . . . Kiritsugu. He is the son of the magus Emiya Norikata, who had been given a Sealing Designation.

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In the deep night, Kiritsugu returned to the wooden villa in the depths of the jungle, where his father received him with a worried expression.

"Ahh, Kiritsugu. Are you all right? Thank goodness . . ." His father embraced him. It had been many years since he felt his father's broad shoulders. It was rare for his strong father to express his true feelings like that.

Releasing Kiritsugu from his arms, his father's expression suddenly turned severe. "I told you never to step out of the barrier of the forest today. Why did you disobey me?"

"... Because I was worried about Shirley ..." His father suddenly turned his eyes away at the mention of her name, confirming a fact. "Dad, were you aware of what happened to her body? Is that why you did not allow me to go outside?"

"That girl ... such a pity. Though I told her the reagent was very dangerous and cautioned her against touching it, it seems she could not contain her curiosity." His father's tone was filled with bitterness, but there was no regret or shame in it; it was the tone of a man telling off a boy for breaking a vase, expressing only blame and anger.

"... Dad, why would you investigate the Dead Apostles?"

"Of course, that's not my true intention. However, it is the traditional field of research of the Emiya family, and we should seek it as far as we can. I have to come up with a solution for aging, at least before your generation takes over. Mortal flesh, shackled by the destiny of death, falls far short of the Radix."

Shirley's pitiful sight, illuminated by the moonlight, appeared once again in Kiritsugu's mind. "Dad ... would you eventually turn me into *that* too?"

"Nonsense. One who cannot control the vampiric urges and becomes a Dead Apostle is a failure; I had told Shirley this a long time ago. The results of this experiment are not as good as I thought they would be. I will have to start from the fundamentals again and refine my theories."

"... I see." Kiritsugu nodded. His father was still intent on continuing. Sacrifices of this degree were not worth his attention. He had to push on until he had satisfactory results.

"Kiritsugu, we'll talk about this later. Our top priority is to escape quickly—I'm afraid there's no time to pack. Soon, those guys from the Association would see through the barrier in this dense forest. We need to leave soon."

His father had been prepared to leave a long time ago. Two large suitcases were packed and sitting in the middle of the room. He was only waiting for his son to return.

"... Are we escaping? Right now?"

"I had long known that this day would come, and prepared a motor boat on the southern coast beforehand. You can never be too prepared." His father took one suitcase in each of his hands, turned around and walked toward the porch. He was now completely off-guard. Kiritsugu took the pistol from his trouser pocket—.32-caliber, a gift from Natalia. Fired at point-blank range, even a child would find it hard to miss, the woman in black assured him of that. The rest would be up to him.

Aiming the gun at his father's defenseless back, visions of the village burned to the ground and Shirley's final tragic expression swam in his mind, as well as the memories he had from living with his father the past ten years, and the gentle sentiments hidden beneath his father's stoic look. His father loved him, and was filled with expectations of him. He too loved his father deeply, and was proud of him.

The stream of emotions tangled, and Kiritsugu wanted to close his eyes. Against their urgings, he opened them instead, aimed, and swiftly squeezed the trigger.

Bam—an unexpected, dry and crisp sound. His father, shot in the back of the neck, fell forward. Kiritsugu walked up, firing twice at the back of his head. Then he stopped, and put two more bullets in his back.

Even Kiritsugu himself was afraid of his own coldness. He could not believe what he had just done. Certainly he had struggled in his heart, wavered to the end. However, his hand had moved, pre-established and out of his control. His body completely disregarded his thoughts, mechanically executing the motions that had to be done. This behavior may be regarded as a talent—such a thought flashed briefly in his mind. Kiritsugu once again sank into emptiness, devoid of any sense of accomplishment.

The wooden floor gradually stained red with blood. *Father is no longer there.* What lay there was nothing but a corpse. *It* was the culprit. *It* rubbed away everything he had, killed everyone on the island, and razed the village to the ground.

Shirley said he was an amazing person, someone with the power to change the world. Kiritsugu once thought so as well. What did the two of them, so early in their youth, understand about the way of magecraft? What did they expect of magi? Tears began to fall without his realization. Even he did not know if his current feelings were of sadness or regret. All he felt was emptiness, like one drained to the core. The gun in his right hand was very heavy, almost too heavy to lift up, but he could not throw it away. His fingers froze on the trigger and refused to

move. Risking the chance of accidental discharge, he swung his right hand wildly try to toss the gun away. His efforts were in vain; his fingers seemed to be glued to the gun. At that moment, someone suddenly grabbed his wrist and easily took the gun from his hand. Only then did Kiritsugu notice Natalia's presence.

"C'mon, the bounded field here isn't as exaggerated as you said. I got in easily." Natalia said in a scolding tone.

"... Are you angry?"

"... You think? I didn't give it away for kids to play with." Natalia glanced at the gun, locked the safety switch, and put it back into her pocket again. "Whether you make it in time is up to your luck."

Had he not taken his course of action, Emiya Norikata would surely have escaped safely and gone into hiding again, then restarted his research on the Dead Apostles at some other unknown place. Perhaps the tragedy triggered on this island would repeat itself. This was not a problem that could be solved by luck. This was something that had to be stopped.

"There's a reason he had to be killed. I had no other choice."

"Now I've even caused a child to kill his own father; I really am a terrible person." Natalia said, discouraged. Hearing this, Kiritsugu smiled, traces of tears still on his face.

"You ... are a good person."

Stunned, Natalia looked blankly at Kiritsugu's smile. Then she sighed and heaved Emiya Norikata's body onto her shoulder.

"I'll take you off the island. You'll have to decide yourself what comes next. Is there anything you'd like to take with you?"

"Nothing at all."

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Kiritsugu spent his next few years with Natalia Kaminski. She did not look after him as an orphan or her adopted child, but ordered him around like an assistant or servant. But this was exactly what Kiritsugu desired.

He studied Natalia's skills and trained his own abilities, aiming to walk the same path as Natalia—to become a hunter. This was the unchangeable path Kiritsugu chose. The tragedy at Arimago Island was not a rare event. Such tragedies took place again and again, like daily occurrences, in shadowy corners of the world.

As long as these magi, willing to bring ill omen into the mortal world to seek knowledge, and these two large organizations, hiding the truth by any method necessary, remained in existence, these mysterious events will continue to take place in obscure corners. Hence, there was money to be made for Natalia.

Elimination of magi such as Emiya Norikata still fell short of the ideal of preventing such tragedies from happening again—it was only one drop of water in the vast ocean, a pithy effort. If the act he undertook that day, killing his father by his own hands, was to carry any meaning and worth . . . all heretic magi like his father must be killed. Only then can he truly prevent tragedies from occurring again. The Sealing Designation Enforcers, hound dogs that hunted extraordinary demons, could do this. The boy chose this thorny road of Shuras without a moment's hesitation.

Natalia belonged to no organization; she was only a freelancer who hunted for bounty. Her targets: Sealing Designated magi in
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possession of precious knowledge who had left the Magi's Association to conduct research in secret. Unlike the Holy Church which eliminated all heretics in the name of justice, the Magi's Association prioritized the safety of the research. Most precious of all were the Magic Crests carved on the magi's flesh. These were created through generations of research, and could produce even greater powers when passed on to successors, especially in magi families.

Through negotiations Natalia had undertaken with the Association, a portion of the Magic Crests gathered from Emiya Norikata's body was allowed to be inherited by his son Emiya Kiritsugu. The important portions were confiscated by the Association, leaving only a fragment—barely half the original amount—for Emiya Kiritsugu to inherit, but it was enough to enable Kiritsugu's use of his magus abilities. Besides, he had no intention of obeying his father's dying wish and resuming magecraft research to begin with. For Kiritsugu, magecraft was not a lifelong career, merely a tool to achieve his goals.

This tool was only one of many which the boy had learnt from the huntress. Tracking, assassination, the usage of various weapons—a hound needs more than one fang. All sorts of knowledge and skills had to be mastered for a hunter to catch up with the prey—in any situation and under any condition—and bring it down. In a sense, the history of mankind is a history of killing. Humans have spent endless time and intelligence researching the art of killing, for the sake of hunting other two-legged beasts that looked just like themselves. Kiritsugu had mastered all these with his body.

The years of blood and gunpowder flew by. Emiya Kiritsugu, having experienced the trials of violent battle during his sensitive adolescence, no longer bore any trace of youthful innocence on his face. Now an oriental of unknown age, his three fake passports claimed him to be an adult, and no one had suspected otherwise. But judging from his appearance, though he was not very tall and his moustache was sparse, that grim and cold look was definitely not the look of a typical teenager.

Until one day ... Despite knowing that Natalia, his teacher and friend, was facing the gravest danger in her life, Kiritsugu devotedly completed his duty without emotional wavering.

No matter how anxious his heart, there was no way to help her —the battlefield was inside a giant commercial airliner more than 3,000FT above ground.

It began with the hunt for the magus known as the Demonic Bee User, Od Volsack. He was said to have successfully created Dead Apostles, and by manipulating the Demonic Bees under his control, he could raise the number of controlled Ghouls through the use of poison delivered by their stings—a dangerous man indeed. Moreover, he had changed his name and face and taken on an ordinary identity; there was no information on him at all. However, four days ago, they had gotten wind that he was taking Flight A300 from Paris to New York. Despite having no knowledge of the target's appearance and name, Natalia accepted the taxing task of finding the target among the plane's 287 passengers and eliminating him.

As her partner, Kiritsugu did not board the plane, but went on ahead to New York to investigate Volsack's fake identity. Mentor and student communicated via radio, calmly and confidently locking down the prey in that sealed space 3,000ft above the sky.

Approximately three hours after the takeoff, the assassination was achieved with unexpected ease. However, that was only the beginning of the tragedy. The Demonic Bees which Volsack had brought onto the plane after deceiving customs officers had caused a fatal disturbance after their master's death. Natalia had not managed to destroy all of them in time; the remaining Bees took the passengers one by one, and the cabin of the giant commercial airliner turned into a Ghoul-ravaged living hell in the blink of an eye.

Sealed in hell with no escape, even Natalia felt an endless despair. While the situation worsened, Kiritsugu could do nothing but await messages from the radio. He could not let go of any possibility that Natalia was still alive. She had instructed him over and over again: you must ensure your own survival by any means. One who held such a creed would definitely make it out this time. But two hours later, the radio was still silent. Finally, when the light of stars was masked by the cyan shade of dawn, the tired voice of a woman came through the static.

"... Can you hear me? Kid ... you aren't asleep, are you?"

"Loud and clear, Natalia. We're both at that most sleepy time right before dawn, having stayed awake the entire night."

"Of course. If you'd dared to go back and sleep last night I'll definitely kill you later ... well, there's good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" Natalia laughed briefly.

"Didn't we promise to start with the good news?"

"Ok, good news first. I'm alive, and the plane is undamaged. I've just ensured the safety of the cockpit; both the captain and the co-pilot have already set the flying parameters before their death. Even I can manage the controls; they seem to be just like a Cessna's."

"Have you communicated with the control tower?"

"Yep. They thought it was a prank, but now they're directing me well."

"... Then, the bad news?"

"Mm—I was the only one who didn't get bitten. The passengers and crew, all three hundred of them, perished and became Ghouls. The other side of the cockpit, separated by a panel, is already a flying city of the dead. Don't be surprised now."

That was the worst situation Kiritsugu had thought of.

"In that condition, will you ... come back alive?"

"Ahh, this door is pretty rigid. Although it's a bit wobbly now, I'm not concerned about it being broken. The landing worries me more. Can this huge tin can really land safely?"

"... I'm sure you'll manage."

"Was that encouragement I heard? Sure gladdens the heart." With a bitter laugh, Natalia gave a powerless sigh. "It'll be fifty minutes before I arrive at the airport. It's too early to pray—kid, chat with me for a while."

"... I don't mind."

An aimless conversation started. They began with the two hours when communication first ceased. Then they listed the dead Volsack's many evil deeds in detail. Finally, they remembered the

magi and Dead Apostles they had destroyed, and those Shura fields they had faced together. Natalia, who was usually quiet, was quite talkative that day. The low roar of the Ghouls in the cabin came through the radio with the sound of repeated banging on the cockpit's door. Chatting was the best distraction from that.

"—When you first told me you want to walk this path, I had a real headache for a long while. Moreover, you refused to change your mind no matter how much I persuaded you."

"Was I such an unpromising disciple?"

"No . . . you had too much promise, too much potential." Natalie laughed bitterly.

". . . What does that mean?"

"You are able to separate your actions from your emotions, something even regular hit men take many years to achieve. But you had it since birth. What a surprising talent."

". . ."

"But hey, it's not necessarily correct to choose your life's path based on talent and ability alone. One's belief and feelings come before talents; that is the key to deciding one's life. Without those, one cannot be regarded as a person anymore. Those who put what needs doing before what they want to do, acting only according to that, are not humans but machines, far removed from the life of a human."

The words of the mentor who had watched him grow up brushed the boy's heart like cold frost.

"I, well . . . I had thought you were a very cold person."

"What's that after all this time? Isn't that the truth? Was I ever gentle toward you?"

"No. You always were strict, absolutely merciless."

"... Usually, disciplining a boy is the role of the father." On the other end of the radio, the was a moment of silence, then Natalia continued with a helpless sigh. "However, I carry a certain degree of responsibility for depriving you of a father's education. How do I put this ... it's not like there was a way to push it off me." *I can only teach you some survival skills; I'm useless for everything else*—Natalia added, in self-mockery.

"... You wanted to be my father?"

"Don't get my gender mixed up, you impertinent brat. At least call me Mother."

"... Right. Sorry." Despite the even tone of his voice, his expression was clearly shocked. Natalia could not have known his current feelings through the radio.

"... For a long time, I experienced the blood and stench on my own. I've almost forgotten the fact that I am all alone. That's why, well ... Haha. It's almost funny. We almost feel like family now."

"Me too—" *Where is the meaning in saying all this now?* Kiritsugu asked himself as he continued to speak. "—I, too, regarded you as a mother. I feel that I'm not alone, and I was happy."

"... Hey there, Kiritsugu. So that we don't feel too awkward when we meet next time, let's stop talking about this." Natalia's bewildered expression could vaguely be discerned in her words; she was still unaccustomed to embarrassment.

"Ahh, things just got worse. I'm landing in twenty minutes. I don't want to commit some fatal mistake at such a vital time because of personal amusement."

"... Sorry." Kiritsugu apologized.

Natalia had no need of an emergency landing. She would also never meet Kiritsugu again. Only Kiritsugu knew that. There was no possibility of Natalia surviving before the Ghouls were completely destroyed. The only way to deal with an airliner full of Ghouls was to plunge it into the Atlantic Ocean. The elimination of the Demonic Bee User would be achieved at the cost of lives—of the passengers, crew, and Natalia Kaminski—Kiritsugu had already prepared himself for this outcome.

But he believed his teacher would demonstrate her amazing abilities at the last moment. Natalia, whose creed was survival at all costs, might prevent the plane's body from being crushed in order to save her own life. He must consider that as well; it would be the unpredictable worst result. Natalia, who prioritized her life above all else, would choose that outcome without hesitation, after weighing out the risks.

She would land the airliner of three hundred Ghouls at the airport and release the hungry dead if there was no other choice. Kiritsugu had already made preparations to deal with this one-in-ten-thousand possibility; he knew her too well. To prevent disaster from expanding further, the A300 must not be allowed to land. That was the unswayable truth regardless of Natalia's welfare.

An hour ago, Kiritsugu had been around almost half of New York, and finally acquired a military surface-to-air portable missile launcher from the black market. At the moment, he was standing on a powered boat floating on the sea, waiting for Natalia's plane to appear in his sight. The giant airline would

circle a while before landing at the New York International Airport. From his position, he would be able to get the plane within range of the missile.

As he purchased the weapon and chose a spot to fire it from, Kiritsugu once again doubted the soundness of his own mentality. To avoid a larger tragedy, calmly accepting Natalia's death was the correct response. But what would that make him, if he gave up on the final miracle that would bring her back alive, and killed her with his own hands instead? It would be great if everything was only an assumption, but right now Emiya Kiritsugu was facing the cruel truth. Soon, he would erase Natalia with his own hands. The A300 now appeared in the sky at the break of dawn, silver wings sparkling.

"... Perhaps I really have lost it." Natalia still believed without a doubt that Kiritsugu, on the other side of the radio, was in a hotel in New York; she said it leisurely with no caution. "Perhaps I would never have ended up saying such things had such a big mistake not occurred. It seems my time is up, too. Should I be retiring ...?"

"—What do you plan to do after that?" Faked an even voice, Kiritsugu set the missile launcher on his shoulder and aimed it at the airliner.

"If I lose my job ... heh, then I might really become your mother."

Even with his vision blurred by tears, he was able to determine the distance to the target accurately—it was within 1,500M; a certain hit.

"You . . . really are my family." Kiritsugu said softly, and fired the missile. In the few seconds he kept his aim on the airliner, his memories of her resurfaced, but the torture did not last long. Locking onto the the giant airliner's heat signature, the missile left Kiritsugu's control and flew mercilessly toward the target like a hungry shark, hitting the gas tank beneath the wings squarely. He watched as the plane tilted and fell.

Like a picture drawn in sand, disintegrated by a stormy wind, the mass of iron that lost its thrust was dismembered like rotten wood, falling onto the surface of the sea in a cloud of fine dust. In the rising morning glow, it danced like confetti at a gala. The first sliver of the dawn that shone from the other side of the horizon never touched Natalia's face. Basking all alone in the morning sun, Emiya Kiritsugu cried soundlessly. Once again, he had saved a crowd of unknown faces, unknown to anyone.

Did you see that, Shirley? I have killed again, as when I killed my father. I would never make the same mistake that I made with you back then. I . . . wanted to save more people . . . Would anyone who learnt of Kiritsugu's actions and intentions thank him for it? Would the passengers at the airport, spared the threat of the Ghouls, praise Kiritsugu as a hero?

"Don't kid me . . . Don't kid me! Bastard!" Grasping the cooling missile launcher tightly, Kiritsugu yelled at the brightening sky. He did not want prestige or gratitude. He just wanted to see Natalia's face once again. He just wanted to call her "Mom," face to face. This was not the conclusion he wanted. This was only the correct decision, with no room for dispute. Kiritsugu's decision

was correct. He erased the one who must die, and saved those with no reason to die. If that was not justice, what was?

It would never come back now. He remembered that distant face so long ago, asking him "What kind of a man would you like to become?" with a gentle look under the blinding morning sun. He should have answered then—if he had the power to freely change the world, if miracles would dwell in his hands—"I want to be a hero of justice!"

Back then, he did not know what the scale of justice would rob, and what it would bring him. Justice took his father, and now it took his mother as well, leaving only the sensation of blood in his hands. Even his right to remember them was stripped away as well. The people he loved; their voices, their faces; none of that will return, except in his nightmares. They would never forgive Kiritsugu, who took their lives with his own hands. That was the choice justice required, the price of pursuing his ideal.

He could no longer turn back now. What he sought would disappear with the slightest hesitation or uncertainty. The price he paid, and all his sacrifices, would be worthless then. Surely he would follow his ideal and reach for its fulfilment as he cursed and hated?

Kiritsugu vowed silently in his heart. He would accept that curse. He would accept this anger. At the same time, he prayed someday that he would drain all his tears and reach that distant and serene utopia.

If the cruelty his hands carried was the limit for humans, then let him wipe away all the tears in the world. That was the last day

of Kiritsugu's youth, the day he stepped onto that thorny and uneven path.

Act 13

– 48:11:28

It was not yet morning. Kotomine Kirei was already waiting at the door of the Tousaka mansion. He had not come here since summoning Archer ten days ago, to this Western-style mansion he had spent his apprenticeship in three years ago, the one place in Fuyuki he felt closer to than even the church.

"Welcome, Kirei. I've been waiting for you." Though it was an unusual hour to receive guests, Tousaka Tokiomi appeared quickly at the door when he heard the doorbell. Perhaps he had not slept at all since leaving Fuyuki Church the previous night. Kirei bowed deeply to Tokiomi in the manner of a disciple to his master.

"There are some things I wish to tell you before I leave Fuyuki, and then I must bid you farewell."

"So it has come to this . . . and on such short notice. To part with you in such a manner—I have my regrets as well."

Tokiomi spoke these words, but there was no trace of guilt on his face. That was to be expected. Tokiomi understood that Kotomine Kirei was but a pawn the Tousaka family had borrowed

from the Holy Church. To Kirei, Heaven's Feel would yield no reward, being a mandatory task assigned by unseen powers from above. Kirei's parting from Tokiomi was not a rejection or a betrayal, but a release from duty. Coming to say farewell was purely an act of formality.

"At dawn, I will board a plane and head for Italy. First, I must hand my father's possessions over to headquarters. I may not be able to return to Japan for some time."

"Oh . . . Come in. Do you have time to talk?"

"Mm. It shouldn't be a problem."

Kirei contained the feelings in his heart and stepped once again through the Tousakas' front door.

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"The more I think about your departure, the more reluctant I feel. Whatever may happen, I hope you can succeed your father Risei's final behest and continue to assist the Tousaka family in fulfilling our unwavering wish . . ."

Tokiomi was now the Tousaka residence's only occupant, but the guest room was nevertheless spotlessly maintained. Perhaps some low-level familiar under his control had been cleaning the place, maintaining it even in this time of intense war. No less was to be expected of Tokiomi.

"It is a pity your efforts against the Einsbern family failed. I understand you had good intentions. Perhaps this is the way that Executors work, but I hope that in future you will duly inform me of the situation before and after you act, so I can be prepared."

Tokiomi's magnanimous attitude made Kirei lower his head further. "To have given you, my teacher, this much trouble even at the last moment . . . I am truly ashamed." Kirei raised his head and saw sincerity in Tokiomi's eyes.

"It is true that we met only because of the Heaven's Feel, but no matter what the circumstances, I am very proud to have had you as a disciple." At this, Kirei momentarily burst out laughing. Tokiomi, completely misunderstanding his disciple's reaction, continued to speak in earnest. "Talent is not something to be taken by force of will, but your sincere attitude toward training as one who walks this path is something even I, your teacher, am much impressed with. Henceforth, continue to fight for the best interests of the Tousaka family, as your father did before you. What do you say, Kirei?"

"I could not wish for more." Kirei smiled slightly and nodded. Tokiomi, who for the past three years had constantly misunderstood his disciple's character and inner world, now also misunderstood the meaning of Kirei's smile. And so he continued to speak even more happily.

"You have put my worries to rest. I only hope my daughter can learn from you. After this Heaven's Feel, Kirei, you shall be Rin's master, and guide her as such." Tokiomi retrieved a letter that had previously been placed at a corner of the desk and handed it to Kirei.

". . . Teacher, what is this?"

"Though it is written rather simply, it can perhaps be considered a will of sorts." Tokiomi smiled wryly. "If—and the chances are small but a possibility nonetheless—if something

unexpected happens to me, then I have written here that the Tousaka household is to be inherited by Rin, and you will be her guardian until she is mature. Hand this letter to Clock Tower, and all further procedures will naturally be taken care of by the Association."

This time, Kirei sincerely accepted the responsibility Tokiomi had entrusted him with; it was not perfunctory verbal assent. After all, Kirei was of the priesthood. It was his duty to fulfill the responsibilities entrusted to him with honesty and reliability.

"Please trust me. Though your disciple's abilities are limited, I will make every effort to take up the responsibility of caring for your daughter."

"Thank you, Kirei." The words were brief, but contained deep gratitude. Next, Tokiomi picked up the thin, long black box that had been beside the letter and handed it to Kirei.

"Open it and see. This is my personal gift to you."

Kirei opened the box. An exquisite dagger lay neatly on the velvet-lined interior.

"This is—"

"The Azoth dagger, meticulously crafted from heirloom jewels. When filled with prana, it can be used as a Mystic Code. You have learned and practiced the ways of the Tousaka magecraft; use this as proof of your graduation."

Kirei held the dagger in his hand and examined it carefully. His gaze fell upon the sharp knife-edge and remained on it for a long time. His face, devoid of expression, must have seemed full of gratitude from Tokiomi's perspective.

"My benefactor . . . I will truly never be able to repay your great care or live up to your expectations."

"To me, you are the best reward, Kotomine Kirei. With this, I can set forth for the final, decisive battle with no regrets." Tokiomi said with a clear smile, then got up from the sofa.

Kirei believed that moment to be an arrangement of fate. If one were to say it had been a mere congregation of coincidences, then how could it have been that Tousaka Tokiomi chose precisely that time and place to provide Kotomine Kirei with that dagger in the form of a gift? Was it all not an indication of inevitability?

"I am truly sorry to have delayed you for so long. Will you still be in time for your flight—"

Tokiomi was facing the guestroom exit, completely defenseless with his back to Kirei. Could this be a coincidence as well? "No, you do not need to worry, Teacher." Or could it be said that this was inevitable, that this was fate? That no matter how much he could have prayed or hoped, everything would have eventually been drawn toward the abyss of betrayal? Kirei began to laugh loudly, a laugh more cheerful than ever.

"There never was a flight to begin with." Not even Kirei himself knew he could laugh so heartily. The dagger in his hand struck at the defenseless back in front of him.

". . . Ah?!"

The Azoth dagger, proof of love and trust, slipped between ribs to pierce Tokiomi's heart. This one strike from an Executor who had experienced countless battles was deadly precise. There was no intention of murder, and no sign of it. Perhaps even Tokiomi, who

had been stabbed, could not understand the significance of this wave of pain in his chest for a brief moment.

Tokiomi staggered forward. Turning his head, he saw only Kirei, smiling brightly, his hands stained with fresh blood—but he still could not understand. With only a dazed expression, devoid of anger, he collapsed onto the carpet. Till his final moment, he must have stubbornly believed his own understanding to be accurate, refusing to accept the real truth. Unerringly believing in the path he had chosen, moving forward without the slightest hesitation every time—what a man, unable to wake to the truth even at his death.

A sparkling aura suddenly surged beside Tokiomi's rapidly cooling corpse. Shining with radiant light, the golden Servant materialized before Kirei.

"Hn—what a disappointing ending." A condescending expression seeped out of those red pupils. Archer nudged the corpse of his former Master with the tip of his foot. "I was wondering he would make a last retaliation before death. Look at his expression—completely at a loss. He was unaware of his own stupidity till the end."

"That's because his Servant was in spirit form at his side. It was not illogical for him to let his guard down."

Hearing Kirei's quip, Archer began to laugh loudly. "Already, you have learned to make wisecracks? Kirei, what progress you've made!"

With a serious expression, Kirei asked Archer. "You really have no qualms about this, Gilgamesh, King of Heroes?"

"Only until I grow tired of you. Once you cease to be interesting, you will meet the same fate as this carcass here. If there is anyone here who should be coming to a realization, it is you."

The reply was acute, but Kirei showed no sign of wavering and nodded. Indeed, he could not entrust his life to such a dangerous character. This could be said to be a deal with a devil—a domineering and violent Servant with neither morality nor loyalty, whose interests were difficult to judge. But this also made them a perfect match.

Those at the pinnacle of morality had not brought Kirei the real answer; it was this Heroic Spirit, completely at odds with morality, who could serve as a goal for him to fight for. Kirei rolled up one sleeve, revealing the Command Seals on his arm, and chanted solemnly.

"Let thy body rest under my dominion, let my fate rest in thy blade. If thou submittest to the call of the Holy Grail, and if thou wilt obey this mind, this reason, then thou shalt respond—"

"I thus swear. Kotomine Kirei, my new Master, thy offering shall be my flesh and blood." The prana supply opened once the contract was completed. The Command Seals on his left hand, functional once again, glowed anew, accompanied by a burst of pain. The pact was ended, and the strongest, most wicked team involved in this fight for the Holy Grail was thus born here, unknown to others.

"Shall we begin, Kirei? . . . You shall command and open the curtains to this farce. As your meager prize, I will grant you the Grail."

"No problem. King of Heroes, you will certainly draw much pleasure from this. Before you find the answer you anticipate, enjoy the jubilation of this battle to your heart's content."

The gaze from red pupils filled with delight met black pupils immersed in gratitude.

– 47:42:07

In the cool morning air, Emiya Kiritsugu stood before an abandoned house in Miyama. It was an old building built many decades ago, bereft of renovation or maintenance. The courtyard possessed a storage room built in the previous era. This was the place he had bought as a preparatory head-quarters for Irisviel. Considering that even Einsbern Castle, with its location beyond city limits, had already been attacked by enemies, it became clear that purchasing this hiding spot had not been meaningless.

Saber was not here. Normally, he could feel the Servant's presence through his Command Seals, but now he felt nothing. Perhaps she was on her way to Rider's headquarters. Realizing this, Kiritsugu planned to follow her. It would be very easy to assassinate an apprentice magus like Waver once his hiding spot was known. However, he could only make his move once Saber had lured the opposing Servant.

Kiritsugu had also followed Tousaka Tokiomi, who had left Fuyuki Church by himself, all the way to the Tousaka house last night, but had found no opportunity to strike. He had felt Archer surveilling the situation from an unknown location. Boldly striking his Master under such circumstances would have been nothing short of suicide.

Although he had confirmed the target's location, he did not go to the scene right away. Instead, he had rushed to this abandoned building which served as temporary headquarters. It was not intuition, but a premonition comprised of many factors; he feared

that this would be his last chance to communicate with his wife. Now, with three Servants already fallen in battle, Kiritsugu was very aware of the situation surrounding Irisviel, the Vessel of the Holy Grail. Had his heart been fragile, he would never have come here.

This meeting with his wife was a trial for Kiritsugu, and in a way also his punishment. The sacrifice required for the Holy Grail he sought was the life of the woman he loved dearly. He had to face that fact without indecisiveness. If he could overcome this trial, the man who emerged would be able to defeat all sentiment in his heart and remove all doubt. Prudent and concrete like a machine, he would hold the Holy Grail in his hands. For a weapon of war, this was the final and greatest test. If he could not handle it . . . the dreams of Emiya Kiritsugu would hold no meaning at all.

Standing in front of the door leading to the underground storage, Kiritsugu knocked on it in a pre-arranged pattern. Soon, Maiya opened the heavy steel doors from within. Kiritsugu noticed the changes in Maiya before any words were said. Her eyes, usually nonchalant and nihilistic, now revealed a sliver of nervousness, as if his very appearance made her waver.

"... Are you here to visit Madam?"

Kiritsugu nodded wordlessly. Maiya lowered her head and said in a low voice.

"Her current situation ..."

"I know, I know everything."

Kiritsugu had to witness the scene in this underground storage. He had long been mentally prepared. With this understanding,

Maiya said no more and stepped out the way, then walked out of the underground storage. In a corner of the dim underground storage, Irisviel lay silently in the Magic Circle, which pulsed with prana. This figure provoked Kiritsugu's memories.

Their first meeting had been just like this. Brought into the deepest part of the Einsbern family workshop by Acht, the head of the household, he had stood before Irisviel, who slept suspended in amniotic fluid. Why would they give the Vessel of the Grail, a contraption with only a few years' of use, such a beautiful appearance? Back then, he found it really unreasonable.

Is *this* the Holy Grail? When he asked the old magus beside him, she, asleep moments earlier, suddenly opened her eyes. The eyes that stared at him through the amniotic fluid, that gaze filled with dark crimson, had completely enthralled Kiritsugu. He could not forget it to this day. It was the same now as it was then. Irisviel opened her eyes. She and Kiritsugu looked at each other, and she gave a small, gentle smile.

"Ahh, Kiritsugu—" Irisviel stretched out her hand and caressed his face. Even a simple movement like took all her energy; her icy cold fingers convulsed a little.

"—Is this a dream? You . . . really came . . . to see me again—"

"Ahh, yes." It was easier than he thought, and he could still speak freely. It was the same as when he had sunk Natalia. Language and action were not affected at all. No matter how tangled his heart was or how frayed his emotions became, his two hands could still complete the job with precision. He could obtain victory—he believed firmly.

Now he was prepared for anything; he could guarantee the trustworthiness of his functionality. The limits of human strength never bothered Kiritsugu. No confusion or anguish could affect his work. For Kiritsugu, his mental system of recognizing a goal and acting toward it could function without being disturbed by any factor whatsoever. In this sense, he was the most perfect tool, because he had this fatal flaw absent in a normal human.

"I . . . feel very happy . . ." Irisviel gently caressed the cheek of the man who could only be considered a machine, and said softly.

"I was able to fall in love with you . . . to marry you . . . to have a husband, to have a daughter. The past few years . . . you gave me everything I wanted . . . I have no regrets. All the happiness in this world . . . is already . . ."

". . . I'm sorry I left so many promises unfulfilled."

I said I'd get you out of that castle of eternal winter and look at the flowers blossoming outside, to look at the sea that sparkled with light on the waves. I once promised you that I'd bring you with me one day and look at all these things. He now remembered; they were such irresponsible promises.

"No, it was good enough. Mmm." Irisviel smiled, not complaining about it. "All that happiness I did not live to experience, all that was left undone, give them to Ilya, your daughter—my most important Ilya."

At that moment, Kiritsugu finally understood why Irisviel, even on the edge of destruction, could still smile with such strength.

"You must . . . bring that child there." Bestowing her hope onto her child, the mother had no fear. That was how she could face her

own demise with a smile, with no trace of terror. "Let that child . . . see everything I failed to see in my stead . . . let her see . . . the cherry blossoms in the spring, the clouds in summer . . ."

"I understand." Kiritsugu nodded. For a machine that only knew to obtain the Holy Grail, this was a meaningless action and yet another meaningless promise.

Even so, he nodded like a human. After he had obtained the Holy Grail and fulfilled his wish of saving the world . . . the machine, having fulfilled its duty, would change back into a human again, would it not? At that time, he would definitely remember his promise to his wife. And at that time, he would carry out the duty of a good father and love his daughter thoroughly. But that was for the near future. It could come true after only a few more days . . . but not now.

"This . . . needs to be returned to . . ." Quivering, Irsiviel placed her hand on her chest and concentrated all the prana within her onto her fingertips.

Suddenly, in her empty hands a golden light started to shine, and it soon enveloped the entire storeroom with warm brilliance. Holding his breath, Kiritsugu looked at everything happening before him. The light gradually formed a silhouette, then turned into an object that shone with a metallic sheen and fell into Irisviel's hands. It was the golden scabbard.

"Iri . . ."

"This . . . is something very important to you. In the final battle, it'll be definitely be useful . . ." Irisviel's voice sounded even weaker than before. That was to be expected. Irisviel, hiding in the Magic Circle in this underground storeroom to slow her

degradation, had separated the last thing protecting her—the miraculous Noble Phantasm, Avalon • All is a Distant Utopia, sealed within her as a Conceptual Weapon—from her body with her own hands.

"I . . . will be fine. Maiya's here to protect me . . . so . . ."

". . . I understand."

As Saber's Noble Phantasm, Avalon had the ability to provide prana to the Servant. Now, since Irisviel could no longer participate in front-line battles with Saber, continuing to equip her with Avalon no longer had any strategic meaning. Even if this Noble Phantasm could slow the speed of her destruction, it did no good in the bigger picture—the most correct choice now was to repossess this Noble Phantasm from her.

Kiritsugu took the golden scabbard, placed his wife's weak body on the ice-cold floor, and stood up. "Then, I'll be going."

"Mm—take care."

The words of farewell were very brief. Emiya Kiritsugu turned and walked out.

Maiya, who had been standing and waiting outside, could not help but draw a sharp breath when she saw Kiritsugu coming out of the underground storeroom. Of course, she did not know the true meaning of the Noble Phantasm shining with light in Kiritsugu's hands. Actually, what surprised Maiya was the change in Kiritsugu himself.

"We'll go finish Rider's Master today. Saber has already left, right?"

"Yes. Just this morning, not too long ago before you came here."

"Very good. Maiya, I'll continue to entrust Irisviel's protection to you."

"Yes, Sir . . . Hmm, Kiritsugu?"

Just as Kiritsugu was about to walk out of the door, Maiya stopped him in a dazed voice.

"What's wrong?"

Maiya stared for a moment at the eyes that turned to her, then gave a small sigh and said, lowering her head.

"It's finally back—that expression you had back then."

". . . Really?" With a low reply, Kiritsugu continued walking outside without turning back.

– 47:39:59

After that completely unbelievable day, Waver finally came to terms with the implications of the current situation. Getting up in the morning, Waver told the old couple he would be coming back later than usual, then rushed to Shinto without even eating breakfast. Though the worst of rush hour was yet to come, the bus heading toward the station already seemed to be full; perhaps many people were commuting between Fuyuki and the neighboring town. With a great ruckus of people around him, Waver was unused to the way the crowd pushed him along. But right then, when he felt so hollow and empty, he was actually filled with a sense of security. Over the past few days, there had been an overwhelming presence continuously filling the space next to him. In comparison, the level of oppression from the crowd felt more like an empty lot abandoned after a bustling ritual.

Of course, Rider's presence was always next to him; even now, he could still feel the majestic and oppressive atmosphere of the Servant in spiritual form. The big guy had been maintaining his spiritual form, not once materializing since that great battle with Caster two nights before. That was normal for any other Servant, as there was no need to materialize and expend excess prana outside of battle. However, that did not apply to Alexander, who participated in the War of the Holy Grail with the goal of materializing after all.

If this had lasted only a few hours, it could have been interpreted as him just having some fun. But it became unusual when he did not reappear for an entire day. There could only be one reason why Rider would not materialize. As a Master, Waver could still converse with his Servant in spiritual form any time. Rider would respond immediately if he called for him now, but Waver did not dare to ask. He was better off not starting a conversation until he knew how Rider would respond, and had thoroughly prepared himself in advance.

To be prepared for anything, Waver decided to start shopping in the morning. First of all, he had to to procure winter sleeping bags and mattresses at the supermarket's outdoor equipment sale. They were expensive, but nothing compared to the gaming console Rider had bought. What really irritated him were the prices at which pharmacies sold energy drinks and portable heaters. Achieving the same effect with magecraft required huge amounts of prana, about ten times the effort. Though it bruised his pride as a magus, Waver, with anger beyond reason, still bought more than he actually needed.

He was intensely annoyed to be born in this era. What bad luck! Why did he have to be born into an era where a portable heater cost only ¥400 and no one knew the harshness of life, instead of one that respected and feared magecraft?

Once he was done buying his necessities, Waver took the bus back to Miyama town, bought some eel fishball bento from the supermarket two stops down the road from the MacKenzies', then heated it gently in a microwave. If he wanted to eat his meal before it got cold, he'd have to hurry to reach his destination.

Actually, Waver was already eager to ask Rider what had happened. However, he could not do anything to a Servant who offered no explanation and refused to show his face. Had Waver been more outgoing, he would definitely have gotten the answer he wanted. But he had many concerns—the immature magus's sense of powerlessness made him afraid to question Rider.

He thought this in his heart, yet refused to bow his head to Rider. After all, it was humiliating enough being ordered around by his own Servant. He was indeed very weak and very useless, but Waver was reluctant to admit it. If he could achieve the best results through prudent preparation, then even Rider could not underestimate him. With these thoughts in mind, Waver likewise chose to remain stubbornly silent in the face of Rider's muteness.

He traversed the residential areas and walked into a bushy forest which was soon to be developed into an urban park. Passing through the trackless brushwood, Waver walked into its innermost depths. Though the scene here varied drastically between morning and night, Waver still marched toward its center with familiarity.

Arriving at his destination, Waver made sure the surroundings were in order, then sighed in relief. Placing the thermal mat on the leaf-strewn ground, Waver sat on it and began eating the bento he had just bought from the supermarket. The microwave-heated bento was already cold and had lost its flavor, but it still contained the energy needed to sustain life.

"—Does that taste good?" It was Rider's voice, which he had not heard for a whole day and night. Even in spiritual form, was

food still the only thing that could arouse his interest? Waver could not help but idly wonder.

"No, it's disgusting. It's probably the most disgusting thing in Japanese cuisine." A reply like that made Rider, still in spiritual form, sigh as if in regret and say: "Kid, do you remember a shop called 'Shogi Okonomiyaki' that you passed in Shinto? The innovative pancake they sell there is really damn miraculous. A pity you didn't buy it . . ."

"If you still want to eat it, hurry up and recover enough to materialize." A strange silence began to fill the atmosphere. However, Waver now appeared to be quite at ease. The apprentice magus continued to speak as he ate the eel bento in big gulps. "Do you know where we are? This is the place where you were summoned. The quality of this spiritual ground hardly needs mentioning, and the Magic Circle used that night for the summoning has not been damaged either. This is the leyline in Fuyuki that suits you the best. This place would definitely speed up your recovery."

Waver had noticed it two nights ago. It was impossible for a large Noble Phantasm like Ionioi Hetairoi to be used two nights in a row without any repercussions. A large amount of prana was required just to expand such a powerful Reality Marble and maintain it for a short time. Moreover, in his battle with Caster, Rider had also been within the bounded field and received heavy damage. Above all, so much prana had been spent that Rider, who clung to his physical form so obstinately, was forced into spiritual form in order to concentrate on recuperation. It was no small amount of prana.

"I'll be staying here the whole day today, doing nothing but sleeping. Take as much of my prana as you like, as long as it doesn't kill me. It should help your recovery a lot."

Rider's spiritual form was silent for a long time, as if he had his mouth open in shock. Then he laughed loudly.

"... Hahaha. Why didn't you say so earlier if you noticed it? Mm, I'm really sorry."

"Idiot! If you don't hurry up and recover from your current condition, I'll be the one in danger!"

Waver felt angry all of a sudden. Rider, who had been so carefree, actually felt apologetic. But if he put some thought into the real reason behind their whole predicament, Waver was the one who should have felt embarrassed. His reason for not wanting Rider to maintain his physical form was obvious—as a Master, Waver's prana supply was far beneath the prana expenditure Rider required for recovery. Of course it would be humiliating for the Master. He was not fit to command a Servant as powerful as Rider. It was clear proof that he was nothing but a weak, second-rate magus. Humiliation and anger were accurate reflections of Waver's current mood.

Was it Waver who was at fault for being unable to accurately grasp his Servant's condition, or was it Rider, who had kept this truth from him? If Rider had brought it up when he felt his prana supply running low and made Waver prepare for it ahead of time, perhaps there could have been some other way.

Finishing his bento, Waver drained the energy drink he had bought in one gulp, then asked the spiritual entity beside him.

"... What's wrong? You've been quiet."

"No, I'm wondering if I can hold on a bit longer. The battle at the river bank wasn't as exhausting as I thought."

In order to stop the sea demon Caster had summoned from coming on land, Rider had expanded the boundary of his Ionioi Hetairoi Reality Marble beyond its limit. Back then, Waver had been more worried about his Servant than his alliance with Saber.

"Your trump card was surprisingly prana-hungry, wasn't it?"

"Not at all, but its size grew bigger. Those army guys weren't summoned, so it did not cost too much prana to maintain."

"Liar. Magecraft of that degree needs an enormous amount of prana just to be activated. Once activated, the army summoned within was a pretty surprising expenditure for you, wasn't it?"

"..."

"When I first saw it, I really did think it was a very efficient Noble Phantasm, just like you said. In retrospect, the amount of prana you took from my Magic Circuits when you first fought Assassin was really too small."

That was when Waver had misunderstood the amount of prana required for Ionioi Hetairoi. Even magecraft must obey the greater rule of equivalent exchange. Activating large magecraft of that degree was definitely not easy. Waver could not help but feel angry once again at his own naïveté. The excessive intake of energy drinks made Waver nauseous, and his chest felt like it was on fire. Waver sat up on the thermal mat, took off his boots, and dived into his sleeping bag.

"Rider, why did you use your own stored prana instead of mine? It is my duty to provide it. And you made that decision

twice in a row without consulting me. Just what are you trying to do?"

"As for . . . that." Rider sighed deeply; it was difficult to explain. "As a Servant, I am purely a killer of souls. If I had involved you when I released all of my prana, it could have threatened your life."

"Even so—I was prepared." Waver said in a low voice, staring at the ground. "I don't want this to be your battle only. This is my first time joining a war. If I do not make sacrifices or shed blood, and do not obtain victory, then this is completely meaningless."

Back when they'd had the chance to stroll around Shinto, he was quickly laughed at for the meaning behind his battle. But even so, he did not cast it aside. He did not give it up. No matter how much he was laughed at for being tiny, what was in this heart would never yield to anyone.

"Do you know why I want to obtain the Grail? I'm not concerned with what happens after I obtain the Grail. I just want to prove this for everyone to see! I just wanted to confirm it! That I, Waver—even someone like me is able to grasp what belongs to me with my own two hands!"

"—But, kid, that's only meaningful under the premise that the Holy Grail actually exists, right?"

Rider's surprising words left Waver gaping and speechless. ". . . Huh?"

"Everyone's fighting madly for the Fuyuki Grail, but does it really exist? It's only a legend. No one's ever seen it with their own eyes, have they?"

What did Rider mean? Waver did not completely understand him, neither could he refute them. He could only nod.

"True, it's like you said, but . . ."

"I, too, have fought for things of uncertain existence." Somehow, Rider's words contained a hint of bitterness and sorrow far from his usual majesty. "I wanted to behold the endless sea with my own eyes—I continuously crusaded across the world for the sake of this dream. Those who believed in me fought with me without a doubt, even sacrificing their own lives. However, even till the end, it was only in their dreams that they saw the endless sea I had spoken of."

". . ."

"Finally, the eastern crusade was disbanded under the persuasion of those who did not trust me. But that was the right thing to do. Had I continued, my army would surely have been defeated somewhere along the way. I only realized the earth was a globe when I came to this era. It was such a farce. Now, anyone could figure out that there is no endless sea just by looking at a map. My so-called dream back then would be nothing more than a delusion now."

"Hey, Rider."

Even if that was the truth, hearing Alexander say it shocked Waver quite a bit. Why would a man who had marched forward so bravely toward the vivid dream in his heart now deny his own dream so calmly? However, those words of rebuttal tangled in Waver's throat and remained unsaid. Waver had the same dream as Rider, but he could not express it. His own pride was at stake.

"I'm tired of others sacrificing themselves because of my whims. If I can ascertain that the Grail indeed exists somewhere, then I will obtain it even if it means your life and mine … but unfortunately, we still don't know whether the Holy Grail really exists. I don't want to make the same mistake, a mistake like not knowing the world is a globe."

"But I … even so, I'm still your Master." Waver wanted to argue, but he immediately mocked himself in his heart. He could not even provide prana, which should have been the least he could do. He could not even detect the weakness of his Servant, who pushed himself to participate in battle.

As if unaware of Waver's worries, Rider's voice, in spiritual form, once again returned to its usual carefree style, and he laughed out loud.

"Kid, that goes without saying. True, your Magic Circuits are a lot more powerful than usual. The leylines here are pretty good too. If we rest for the whole day like this, we can get something going at night."

Waver himself could already feel the amount of prana Rider had absorbed through his Magic Circuits. The previous burning sensation in his chest had already completely disappeared, and was now replaced by an overwhelming exhaustion, as if all the strength in his body had been drawn away. Even moving his fingers and opening his eyes became difficult.

"… What? Get some things going? What do you plan to do after this?"

"Hmm, it's gonna be like this. Tonight, we should regard Saber as our opponent first, and attack that castle in the forest again."

"Not going to chat with them, right?"

"Of course not. The alliance is over. What should be said has all been said. What's next is to fight with everything we've got."

Although Rider's voice was still powerful and confident, there was an audible wariness hidden within. Saber would definitely count as a powerful enemy even for Rider. He was already prepared for a majestic and desperate battle to the end.

"... If we keep this up, how much can you recover by nighttime?"

"About that ... if all goes well, I won't be able to use Gordius Wheel in its most powerful form, but simple flight shouldn't be a problem." Then, as if it had been weighing on his mind, the spiritual form continued speaking with a sigh mixed in his words. "But Ionioi Hetairoi—I fear I can only use it one more time."

"Oh ..." Amid this misfortune, having one final trump card was the greatest strength left in his hands. "That should be left for the battle with Archer. I can't handle Goldie's killing blow without my trump card. The other enemies can probably be finished with just the war chariot."

That was fine strategically, but a new question suddenly emerged in Waver's mind.

"But ... Rider, why did you pick Saber specifically as your opponent?"

"Hmm?"

"Didn't you say that you weren't regarding her as an enemy anymore? Besides, being the way you are now, shouldn't you do your best to minimize the number of battles in the future? And Archer ... never mind, that's some kind of strange promise that

you made yourself; can't go back on that now. But the battle with Saber should be put off; best to wait for other Servants to finish her off."

Listening to Waver's serious advice, Rider could not help but laugh. "Oi, kid. If I could stretch out my fingers, I'd give you a hard flick on the forehead."

"Wha—what!? Isn't that the best strategy?"

Had Rider's physical form been here, Waver would've been covering his forehead with his hands. However, now that the other is in spiritual form, the short magus appeared a bit more forceful than usual.

"I must be the one to defeat Saber. We're both Heroic Spirits, so that is my duty."

"... What does that mean?"

"If I'm not the one to defeat her, that idiotic woman will keep walking down her path of misguidance. Then it'd really be too sad for her."

Though Waver had a hard time understanding his intentions, he understood his feelings as King of Conquerors, this guy who was willing to let even the War of the Holy Grail go. As a Master, distracting thoughts were best discarded—in fact, Waver did not even have the optimism to wish for someone else to finish off Saber. The Servant called Saber was truly too powerful. That mysterious golden Servant, Archer, was also a mighty competitor; Waver thought him very shrewd, and it was nearly impossible that Saber would damage him before Rider fought her. For Rider, a face-to-face confrontation with Saber was more or less inevitable.

"... Never mind, if that's how you want it to be ... fine ..." Waver wanted to argue a bit more, but realized that nothing would change no matter what he said, so he gave up. Feeling so tired that he could not fend off sleep, he tucked himself into his brand new sleeping bag, feeling the warmth of the down quilt.

"All right, stop holding yourself up. Go to sleep, kid. Rest is your battle now."

"Mmm ..." Though there was still much to be said, he would leave that for when he woke up. He did not need to be on guard against getting his forehead flicked when Rider was not in physical form, but something seemed to be missing. Moreover, he was now too tired to even open his mouth and speak. Better to just have a good nap.

Waver began to relax his exhausted body, and sank into a deep slumber.

– 37:02:47

When Irisviel opened her eyes again, her first vision was of the setting sun dyeing the high windows of the underground storage a sheen of crimson red. She had been in a deep sleep since losing consciousness, and it felt like the entire day had disappeared. Such deep unconsciousness might be better described as a state of near-death. But she felt fine at the moment; the long rest did have some effect after all. Though she had not the strength to sit up, she could at least gather enough breath to speak.

Irisviel looked to her side and discovered Hisau Maiya still sitting in a corner of the room, like a painting. She was in the same place holding the same posture as she did when Irisviel fell asleep, but the razor sharp look from her eyes held not a sliver of exhaustion or fatigue. She was just staring blankly into air.

Though a dependable sight, she could easily have been mistaken for a robot or familiar. Even Irisviel could not help but feel a certain degree of fear toward her. Just what kind of training and how strong a will must she have had to be able to maintain such a degree of focus? It was unimaginable.

With some awe, Irisviel suddenly realized—this woman called Hisau Maiya may have achieved a state beyond the realm that Kiritsugu pursued.

"Hey, Maiya." Irisviel called softly. Like a hound suddenly hearing the calling trumpet, Maiya immediately turned her eyes toward Irisviel.

"Why . . . do you fight for Kiritsugu?"

"... Because I have nothing else." Realizing that her charge was not in any pain or discomfort, and simply wanted to chat, Maiya relaxed her taut nerves a little and answered after a short pause for thought. "I can't remember anything about my family or my name. This name, Hisau Maiya, was given to me by Kiritsugu when he made my fake passport."

"Huh?"

Seeing the surprise on Irisviel's face, the end of Maiya's mouth twitched with a small smile. For someone like her, who showed no discernible emotion on her face, that was the limit of what she could do to show her relaxed mood.

"All I can remember is that it was a very poor country. There was no hope, there was no future. All it had left was communal hatred and conflict over food for survival. War would never end. There were no funds left to maintain armies, but the mutual slaughter continued without pause ... No one remembered whose idea it was, but at that time someone decided it was faster to get children to go to the frontline with guns than to hire soldiers and train them."

"..."

"I don't remember anything from the times before I had a gun in my hand. I could only keep killing others to prolong my own life. Snipe my enemy, pull back the trigger; that was the only function left in my being. Everything else was discarded ... the children who couldn't do that were all killed by those who could. I lived on aimlessly like that until I met Kiritsugu."

As Maiya spoke, she lowered her head to look her at hands. The long, slender fingers possessed no feminine gentleness; they were like sharp weapons of murder.

"As a human, my heart had already died. Only my body still functioned, maintaining my human behavior. The person who picked me up and preserved my life was Kiritsugu; he may use my life in any way he wishes . . . That is why I'm staying here."

Although Irisviel had long predicted that Maiya had a tragic past, the things she said far surpassed Irisviel's imagination. She stayed silent, unable to respond. This time, it was Maiya who opened her mouth and posed a question instead. Not expecting such a response from Maiya, Irisviel could not help her surprise.

"You've always lived in such a secluded castle, knowing precious little about the outside world. Why would you support Kiritsugu, who vowed to change the world, so much that you would be willing to sacrifice your own life?"

"I—" Maiya's words once again made Irisviel sink deep into thought. Emiya Kiritsugu, her husband, the man who dreamed of saving the world—now that she knew he sought the Holy Grail hidden in her own body, did she in her current state still hold the same ideal as he? "—That's true. To be honest, I don't understand Kiritsugu's ideal all that much."

Yes, her answer was—negative. "Ultimately, I only pretended to understand. Perhaps it was for the sake of staying with the one I love. Like you said, Maiya, I know almost nothing of the world Kiritsugu wants to change. This ideal in my heart was probably something Kiritsugu taught me."

". . . Do you think that?"

"Mmm. But please keep it a secret from Kiritsugu." This was an incredible feeling for Irisviel. The words she spoke before Maiya would never be spoken in her husband's presence. "I always told him I firmly believed him to be right. I could even sacrifice my life for his ideal. I pretended to possess the same ideal as him. If I gave my life for an ideal we both shared—compared to a woman who simply sacrificed herself for her husband—wouldn't I be less of a burden for Kiritsugu?"

"I see."

Her love for Kiritsugu and her trust in Saber were two different feelings. For Irisviel, this reliance on someone, a feeling she was experience for the first time, could probably be called 'friendship'.

"Don't you have any wishes of your own, Madam?" This question again. Irisviel could not help but remember the battle she and Maiya had faced together in the forest. Back then, against Kotomine Kirei's overwhelming presence, just where had that surge of fighting spirit come from? "I probably do have . . . a wish. I wish for Kiritsugu and Saber to be victorious. I wish for them to obtain the Grail."

Of course, that would also mean Irisviel's death, her eternal farewell with Kiritsugu. Even so, this wish became the fountain of courage for Irisviel.

"Is that . . . the Einsbern family's wish—the achievement of the Third Magic?"

"No. I don't mind even if we don't reach the Greater Grail. What I hope for is an eternal end to war. It's what Kiritsugu seeks as well—to change the structure of this world and end all fighting.

This battle for the Holy Grail at Fuyuki City is no exception, isn't it? This is the fourth war, and I wish this would be the last Heaven's Feel. I hope to be the last homunculus sacrificed as a vessel of the Grail."

"Mmm."

Ilyasviel von Einsbern. A creature with all the great achievements of alchemy gathered within her, born from the womb of a homunculus and conceived with the sperm of a magus. Although she had not seen her with her own eyes, Maiya had heard of her existence long ago.

"It was the family head's plan to use a homunculus with even greater capability as the next protector of the Grail. He not only implanted the secrets of the Holy Grail into the embryo, but also added Magic Circuits to her exterior and made her physical body capable of becoming a vessel of the Grail by itself. The head of the family had already predicted the possibility of a fifth round before the fourth Heaven's Feel began, and he allowed me to give birth to Ilya. If Kiritsugu and I fail, that child will become the experimental specimen for the Dress of Heaven."

Irisviel's voice was full of the gentleness of familial love. This was the concrete evidence that the homunculus called Irisviel was not simply an artificial machine. She had the heart of a human, the benevolence of love, a smile of happiness, and tears of sadness. The warmth swelling in her heart was the most important part of being human.

"When I held that child and fed her, I was very much aware that she would not be able to escape the destiny of becoming a vessel in the end. Can you understand the feelings of a mother

who sees endless despair when looking at her beloved child?" Maiya was silent. Irisviel continued. "However, that is the destiny carried by the homunculi of the Einsberns. Be it my child or my granddaughter, this sorrow will be tasted again and again each time a daughter is born. This fate will be repeated each time the Fuyuki Holy Grail descends. Therefore, I hope this pain will end here with me, with my body as a means to end the stubborn wish of the Einsberns. If my wish can be fulfilled, my daughter will be freed from this tragic destiny. That child would be able to live her entire life as a human, without anything to do with the Holy Grail."

"Are those the feelings of a mother?" Only when Maiya asked this did Irisviel realize she had exposed too much of her feelings. She gave an embarrassed, bitter smile.

"Perhaps. You might find it hard to understand, Maiya."

"It's not too hard. I too have been a mother before."

"—Huh?" Irisviel almost doubted her own ears.

As if slightly apologetic for surprising Irisviel so, Maiya related the event calmly. "I ... experienced pregnancy and delivery, although it could be said to be an accident."

"... Were you married once?"

"No. I don't know who the father is. On the battlefield, every night in the barracks, the male soldiers would come round to us female soldiers and ... I can't remember when it started ... anyway, I became pregnant soon after I became a woman. The child wasn't given a name, and I don't know if he's still alive. If he's not already dead, he must still exist in some remote corner of

that battlefield, fighting for his life. The children there are all given guns and sent to battle at the age of five."

"How can it . . .?" Hearing this former child soldier recounting tragic stories of the past, Irisviel was stunned.

"Are you surprised? But such things are not new in this world, are they? Modern terrorists and guerrilla warfare groups know the benefits of using children as soldiers, and early successes such as I serve as evidence. Those who share my experience are not decreasing in number in this age, but increasing instead." Maiya narrated silently, her eyes seeming less and less alive. Sorrow and hatred also began to disappear from her voice. Perhaps only endless despair remained in her memories. "Madam, perhaps you thought the world you saw with your own eyes for the first time was very beautiful, and you envied the happy people living in it. However, I am very envious of you, who always lived in that castle. You did not experience any of the terror and ugliness of this world."

Although there were no feelings of jealousy or hatred in Maiya's contemplation, Irisviel felt rather embarrassed upon hearing it. Detecting Irisviel's thoughts, she continued. "If such a world can really be changed . . . then no matter how Kiritsugu chooses to use my life for that end, I will not utter a single word of refusal."

But I don't know how to do anything apart from fighting— Maiya muttered softly to herself. There was no exaggeration in that sentence. Without a goal and without hope, her heart was as desolate as a barren, fire-ravaged field. Though her inner feelings were different from Kiritsugu's, they were a soldier's feelings.

Maiya's existence constantly served as a reminder to Kiritsugu, and at the same time provided him with an example. Because of Maiya's close existence, Kiritsugu had sealed himself within this dilemma and made himself a cruel hunting machine devoid of mercy.

"What . . . do you wish to do after Kiritsugu achieves his wish?" When Irisviel asked this, Maiya's eyes once again became confused.

"—I never imagined I'd be able to complete this task and still live. If I really managed to stay alive, I would have no reason to keep living. There should not be any place for me in the world after it's changed by Kiritsugu." A world without war had no place for someone like her, someone who knew nothing but combat. For Maiya, it was the logical conclusion.

Such sad, melancholic feelings made Irisviel speak out. "No. That's not true. Maiya, there are still things you have to do after the war ends." Irisviel continued speaking as she stared into the confused eyes of the female soldier. "You must search for your family and your own name, and the whereabouts of your child. They are things that should not be forgotten; they are things to remember."

"Is that so . . .?" Maiya's reply was emotionless and nonchalant, a contrast to Irisviel's passionate speech. "If we really can usher in a world without war, then the memories of people like me would be nothing short of nightmarish. Remembering them would only make me hurt more. Would you want me to bring the seed of hatred into the utopia we've finally created?"

"That's not true. Your life wasn't a dream. It held the facts of history. A peace created by burying those memories in the darkness of the past is nothing but a sinful lie. I think a truly peaceful world should not simply forget those past pains. We should solemnly remember these pains and sacrifices so we don't head down the same road, and can continue to create a peaceful new world."

Maiya gazed at Irisviel silently, then spoke with a slightly more relieved face. "You should have said these things to Kiritsugu earlier. Had you done that, maybe he would have obtained salvation."

Maiya's heartfelt words brought both joy and loneliness into Irisviel's heart. Perhaps—as she was on the verge of destruction, she would never have the chance to chat with her husband again. "—Then, Maiya, I trust you to bring these words to him. Tell him I said them."

Maiya replied with a vague shrug of her shoulders. "I'll do as I see fit. But that's to come after the war ends. We should not be careless for now."

Though Maiya's tone was cold, Irisviel heard the playfulness in her words. "Really, you're just—" Before Irisviel finished speaking, the underground storage suddenly began to shake violently .

Maiya rushed to Irisviel and held her shoulders, now battle-ready, her gaze sharp as a blade. Grabbing the light machine gun with her right hand, she aimed it at the iron doors of the underground storage. The storage shook once again. This time, the thick and heavy iron door deformed with a violent impact

from the outside, bashed in by someone outside. It was a terrible feat only possible with a mechanical crane. For the two participants of this Heaven's Feel, it was nothing surprising—they only felt despair. If it was really a Servant attempting to charge into the underground storage, Maiya's weapons would be completely useless against it. Trapped in a dead end, they could not even escape.

However, before terror could even pass through their minds, there came a disbelieving confusion. Who could have known that Irisviel was hiding in this underground storage? The protective barrier should have detected any clairvoyance or arriving familiars. However, the enemy had skipped reconnaissance and sent the Servant directly to Irisviel's safe house with such accuracy; could it be that the enemy had learned of this place a long time ago?

There was a third shockwave. Before the iron doors were destroyed, the earthen walls collapsed first, unable to take such punishment. Dust soared, and the iron doors fell into the underground storage. The setting sun shone in through the doorway, staining the room blood-red. The gigantic figure looming over the debris and dust was undoubtedly the King of Conquerors, Alexander.

Maiya could only hold onto the light machine gun in her hands with utter despair.

Act 14

– 37:02:20

As dusk was about to fall, it vaguely occurred to Saber that the day's ambush might once again be a waste of effort. The thought frustrated and unsettled her.

Following the intelligence gained from the Master of Archer, Tousaka Tokiomi, she had arrived at Miyama and located the residence of Glen Mackenzie and his wife. An old woman answered the doorbell. According to her, her grandson and his friend had indeed been staying there over the past few days. The old woman seemed to have mistaken Saber for her grandson's friend as well, and told the whole truth without reserve. Saber persuaded the old woman to describe the appearance and clothing of the two people. Undoubtedly, they were Rider and his Master. It was regrettable, however, that she could not feel the presence of any Servant there. If there was a Servant hiding in such a small house, it would have been possible to sense his presence even at the entrance.

According to the old woman, the two had left in the morning and not returned since. It was worth suspecting that they somehow knew of Saber's coming arrival and had fled, but it was truly difficult to imagine that the haughty King of Conquerors would actually resort to cowardly tricks like flight. If he intended to seize victory, he would definitely attack head-on. Saber concluded that they had simply missed each other by coincidence. Courteously taking her leave of the old woman, she decided to keep watch at a distance and wait for Rider to return.

Of course, she concealed the truth from the old woman. Though they had been deceived by Waver Velvet, this was an ordinary family which had nothing to do with the events surrounding them. Rider must have considered this as well. He had been able to set aside the fight for the Holy Grail in order to stop Caster's atrocities and prevent Fuyuki City from falling into crisis. From this, Saber judged that the King of Conquerors would never act against the pride-worthy deeds of a true Heroic Spirit. After Rider returned and discovered Saber, he would definitely choose a location worthy of a Servants' battle and have an open showdown.

Aware that she was a conspicuous target, Saber decided to wait at the nearest bus stop. Henceforth, she kept intent watch, but a few hours passed by without any sign of movement. Though she could not see the Mackenzie house from her position, Rider would definitely sense the presence of a Servant upon his return and seek her out. He was not the sort of opponent to ambush her or run away. He would definitely welcome Saber's intent of challenge and lead her to a suitable location for combat.

As strange as it was to say, Saber professed full trust toward this Servant, Rider. Though their respective viewpoints could not be reconciled, it was incontestable that the other Heroic Spirit would take action according to his pride as a king. He would only challenge openly, never plotting clandestinely or betraying trust. That was because Rider would never choose despicable tactics or strategies that would damage his reputation. Rather, the cause of her unease was her allies rather than her opponents.

Her Master, Emiya Kiritsugu, was eyeing Rider's Master with intentions and combat goals completely opposing her own. At this very instant, he might even be using her as bait to lure Rider out, keeping watch from afar—there was nothing wrong in thinking so. Indeed, she had to make such mental preparations. Kiritsugu probably believed the instant at which Rider went all out to confront Saber to be the optimal opportunity to assassinate his Master.

With this thought in mind, Saber's heart felt weighty. Kiritsugu might as well carry out a showdown between magi, with the Masters of Berserker and Archer as targets. That would have been fine. Kiritsugu would only be obtaining victory through strategy and power play rather than by relying on Saber. It was for his own legitimate reasons that Kiritsugu wanted the Grail. It was not unreasonable to desire a victory that could be obtained through more reliable means. But this showdown with Rider had a line she was absolutely unwilling to cross.

If there could not be a fair showdown between them—not as Servants, tools for the Grail, but as Heroic Spirits of great pride—Saber would be forever unable to undo the knot left in her heart

by the Grail question-and-answer session from several days ago. Alexander reveled in his tyrannical kingship without restraint; he reveled in the violent way of the Ionioi Hetairoi, and took pride in it. Were she not to defeat him with the symbol of the King of Knights' ideology, Excalibur—the Sword of Promised Victory —then Arturia's way of kingship would be broken and ended.

The strength of Rider's Noble Phantasm gave cause for fear at the very thought. Even if Saber used her own Noble Phantasm to its fullest extent, victory was not guaranteed. The result of a showdown between an anti-army and anti-fortress Noble Phantasm was beyond human imagination. Emiya Kiritsugu, thinking such a large price for victory to be a foolish course of action, would pay it with only a perfunctory smile. But to Saber, the Holy Grail should be a thing to be fought for on ideals. The basis of her kingship was under threat; she would not tolerate methods that sidestepped this problem. Only by assuring the way of kingship—the pride of the King of Knights—would the Holy Grail choose the King of Knights.

For this very reason, if Kiritsugu interfered in this battle as he did in the duel with Lancer, this Heaven's Feel would be void for Saber. Even if those despicable methods saw them through the final battle, she would not take the fruit of victory, the Grail. If Rider were to set up a Reality Marble to protect his Master before the battle, the fight would not be interrupted. But Kiritsugu also understood Rider's techniques. If he were to play any tricks before the activation of Ionioi Hetairoi . . .

Bringing her heels up onto the chair, Saber gritted her teeth. She felt very frustrated for not being able to read Emiya

Kiritsugu's intentions. She was facing a strong adversary, yet could not concentrate her full strength; it made her all the more apprehensive. The bone-chilling north wind grew colder as Saber waited uneasily, even more anxious and unsettled than before.

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Just as Saber feared, Emiya Kiritsugu was indeed there, on the rooftop of a six-storey apartment in a public housing estate across the street, approximately eight hundred meters from where she was. Unlike the haphazardly arranged edifices, the rooftop of the apartment was structured somewhat strangely; residents were hardly likely to use it. Though somewhat difficult to get there, one would be hard to disturb once in position. Concealed by the water tower even from downstairs, it was an excellent position for sniping or setting up an ambush. Even the smoke and smell of tobacco would not be noticed here. Enjoying to his heart's content the vitality and energy from cigarettes, Kiritsugu's mental burden here was much smaller than Saber's.

The sniper rifle scope, propped on a tripod, was aimed at the front door of the Mackenzie home. Another portable scope, specially prepared, saw Saber's every action clearly as she sat in front of the bus stop. It was fairly difficult to observe with two alternate scopes without break, but it was a situation that could not be helped since he was unable to rely on Maiya's help. She had not managed to leave in the end because she had been entrusted with the job of guarding Irisviel. The hunting of adversaries had to be be Kiritsugu's responsibility alone.
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Kiritsugu had begun observing the Mackenzie house slightly later than Saber had; Saber's inactivity was clear indication that Rider was not at home at the moment. The Master was definitely not around then; he was not bold enough to stay home alone under these circumstances. Once he discovered the enemy's Servant was pacing at the door, he would definitely summon Rider at once. Unlike Saber, he took the situation more seriously than she did. They had left home the day after he learned of the existence of Glen Mackenzie's family, and never returned since; the timing was too precise to be a coincidence. Though there was no concrete evidence, there was still a relatively high chance that Waver Velvet had discovered the enemy's attack and fled in a hurry. Nevertheless, Kiritsugu continued to wait with a thread of hope, thinking this was also an issue worthy of thought.

If Waver returned again to the Mackenzie house, it would be necessary to blow up the house with a timed bomb. But if he had already fled, he must have already found another stronghold, in which case the probability of his returning to this house was very low. He would not be able to use that old couple to bait Waver the same way he baited Kayneth with Sola.

Kiritsugu held high regard for Waver's indifference to the fortress's security and his choice of an ordinary household for his stronghold. Waver's strategy of concealment was much better than their extravagant strongholds of the Three Families of the Beginning and Kayneth, which were easy to find. It was difficult to conclude that a magus who could make this judgment would show sympathy for the household he was temporarily living in.

To Waver, the Mackenzie couple was only a pair of pawns to be abandoned.

The impatience that came with wasting precious time and the taboo of acting with undue haste—the two thoughts crossed in Kiritsugu's mind. On one hand, he had given up hope of Waver's return; on the other hand, he was unable to abandon the possibility that Waver's departure was mere coincidence. he found it difficult to imagine that the young magus could be a step ahead in a battle of information. From the beginning, Kiritsugu had never treated Waver as an opponent. Though he had later learned some of his background through additional investigation, he had only considered Waver Velvet a novice magus who became a Master by chance, concluding that he was a layman no different from ordinary people who did not know magic.

Of course, Kiritsugu was not the sort of person who correlated ability with experience. Remembering that he had already been a ruthless assassin when he made his debut, he did not think himself a rare example. But he had observed Waver Velvet's performance on the battlefield several times. Based on that, it was still difficult to say if he could become a strong opponent capable of surpassing Kiritsugu. He had never gotten a clear answer about that, and now, when he was beginning to feel inexplicable anxiety . . .

Suddenly, intense pain burned at the base of Kiritsugu's little finger; his back stiffened.

"...?!"

Back when Kiritsugu started treating Hisau Maiya as a proper assistant, he had put a spell on a strand of her hair and embedded

it in the subcutaneous tissue of his little finger. At the same time, Maiya had also embedded a strand of Kiritsugu's hair in her finger. If the Magic Circuits of either one entered a state of extreme stagnation—the stage at which one's life force was on the verge of death's impasse—the strand of hair would burn, warning the other and notifying them of danger. That was a measure implemented for a worst-case scenario, when it was impossible to use a wireless network or familiar to convey information. That is to say, it was only a signal to inform the other that it was too late. For it to activate now, at this moment, what exactly could it mean . . . ?

Before wavering, one must first be caught in a quandary. Kiritsugu mobilized all his neurons and pondered the situation at hand, formulating response plans. Maiya was on the verge of death—in other words, this meant that Irisviel, hidden in the underground storage, was in danger. The sequence of events and its cause could not be determined now. The absolute priority was to help them as soon as possible. The only method available was the fastest—a miracle made possible by the Command Seals on his right hand.

"I order my puppet in the name of the Command Seals!" Kiritsugu clenched his fist, at the same time reciting the spell as quickly as an automatic machine. "Saber, return to the underground storage at once!"

The prana sleeping in one of the Command Seals carved on the back of Kiritsugu's hand woke up and shone with light.

It was not an overstatement to say that Saber was very surprised. She immediately understood that she had become the subject of some powerful magecraft. In the next instant, she was stripped of all recognition of the surrounding space and sent through a 'transfer' without existence or direction. That was probably the legendary spell of Servant command. With an ultimate speed that almost negates laws of cause and effect, she had already overcome the distance of space in mere milliseconds at a speed close to that of light, moving from one point in space to another.

Even so, she was indeed a sword-wielding Heroic Spirit of special conditioning. Though she had just been transported from a chair beside a bus stop to a completely different place, the familiarity of the underground storage made her understand immediately that the strange phenomenon just now was caused by the activation of one of Kiritsugu's Command Seals. In addition, some emergency must have occurred here that necessitated her immediate return to guard the headquarters. In the few milliseconds between the completion of the space break and her arrival on the floor of the underground storage, Saber had already completed the transformation from her disguise suit to her silver white armor.

The situation was clear at a glance. The metal door had been broken down by brute strength. Irisviel, who should have been lying in the middle of the Magic Circle, had vanished; in her place was Maiya's body, covered in blood, writhing and discarded.

"Maiya!"

Saber quickly ran to her side. She could not help but furrow her brow at the depth of her wounds. The injuries sustained in the

Einsbern forest did not even compare with this. What she sustained now were injuries that were fatal if not treated immediately.

As if feeling the Servant's radiant presence, Maiya slowly opened her eyes.

"Sa . . . ber . . .?"

"Maiya, pull yourself together! I will bind these wounds immediately. It's all right—" But Maiya pushed away the hand that Saber stretched out to her. "Quickly . . . go after him, quickly, outside . . . Rider, he . . ."

". . ."

If the Command Seal-induced voyage here had been surprising, Saber was even more surprised at Maiya's reaction. She must have known the extent of her injuries, and understood that she was on the verge of death. But this silent assistant to an assassin cared more for the safety of the kidnapped Irisviel than her own life, and was urging Saber to prioritise Irisviel's safety.

"But then—" Just then, Saber suddenly understood. This woman was also a knight. Though unlike her own proud expressions, this courage to abandon life for the duty she had taken up was precisely the chivalry that Saber believed so firmly in.

I must protect Irisviel in the underground storage until the last moment—Hisau Maiya had certainly already made an oath to Kiritsugu and Irisviel. To entrust Saber with that promise she could not carry out to the end, she was willing to lose her own life.

"I . . . it's all right . . . Kiritsugu will come soon . . . so . . . you must, quickly . . ."

Saber gritted her teeth and shut her eyes. Every minute and every second Saber wasted worrying about Maiya, Irisviel could be moving toward a hopeless situation. The thread of hope that Maiya could be saved by Kiritsugu, who would quickly rush here, still remained. But the fate of Irisviel, who had been taken away, had no guarantee if Saber did not give chase immediately. The marks left behind in the underground storage were undoubtedly a Servant's doing. The follow-up attack could only be carried out by another Servant—and that had to be her.

"—Maiya, you must hang on till Kiritsugu arrives. I will bring Irisviel back safely."

Maiya nodded and shut her eyes, reassured. Saber made a new vow to continue Maiya's own—there was no reason to hesitate further. She flew out of the underground storage like a hurricane, leaping onto the roof in a single bound, and gazed into the darkened, faraway sky in search of the enemy's figure.

Since it was an instantaneous transfer induced by a Command Seal, surely the attacker must not have left very long ago. The enemy had not gone far. Even if she was unable to sense his presence, it was possible to find him by sight alone. Saber stood on the rooftop, scanned the surroundings with supernatural Servant vision, and effortlessly caught sight of the enemy.

About half a kilometer away, a figure stood majestically on the roof of what looked like an apartment building of the business district. A robust physique, curly, flame-colored hair, and a crimson mantle; it was undoubtedly the King of Conquerors, Alexander, whom she had met many times before on the battlefield.

"It wouldn't be—unless it really was Rider?!" Saber still held a strand of suspicion regarding Maiya's eyewitness statement.

That the King of Conquerors, whose name had been unyielding all this time, would employ such base methods—it was indeed difficult to believe. But his thickset hands were indeed holding up the unconscious form of Irisviel; the sight left no room for doubt. Though it was yet unknown how they had guessed Saber's new stronghold, this was undoubtedly the Rider who had just ambushed Maiya and critically injured her.

Rider showed himself openly, luring the enemy to venture deep; he immediately turned and vanished to one side of the edifice immediately after meeting Saber's gaze.

"Damn . . .!"

Saber took stance and intended to continue pursuit, but her adversary was a Heroic Spirit of the Rider class—Saber could not help but purse her lips. It would be easy to continue like this, leaping through the streets in pursuit, if other party was also traveling on foot like she was. If Rider fled on his Gordius Wheel, she would not be able to catch him. But Saber also had the skill of Riding. To chase a flying Noble Phantasm, she needed a long-distance cruiser. She would definitely have given up pursuit for lack of a way to catch up, but Maiya had given her a new steed just the previous day. With deep gratitude to Kiritsugu's foresight and meticulousness in preparing for every eventuality, Saber leaped to the 'horse', dispelled the prana armor that would only hinder her riding, and mounted the steed parked in the abandoned courtyard.

– 36:48:13

Emiya Kiritsugu was very sensitive to the scent of death. Perhaps it was because he had witnessed the deaths of others countless times. Death could not be seen, nor could it be heard. Nonetheless, he could still sense the silent descent of something unknown at the moment when life waited to disappear from the body. The times when he felt that 'joy' were definitely times when he must helplessly watch someone else's final moments, when their lives already beyond saving.

Holding on to the gun tucked in at his waist, he carefully crept into the underground storage, its iron doors already smashed in. There was no killing intent nor any scent of danger, only still air permeated with the stench of blood; the heat of battle had already cooled. A little figure lay curled up on the floor, its breathing almost too faint to be heard. Unmoving, its gradually cooling body temperature was surprisingly nostalgic—

He had known this scene would play itself out eventually. He had saved this girl's life, but her heart was already dead the moment she met Kiritsugu. Though alive after her baptism of bullets and gunpowder, what she felt was not happiness, but confusion at her good luck. She could no longer feel any meaning or joy in the fact that she was living as a human again. She was returning her life back to the master who had given it to her—she seemed to be telling Kiritsugu that, with eyes closed. It was a meeting that had once taken place eleven years ago.

Kiritsugu also accepted this conclusion. He had known with a certain premonition that this girl would die in the near future. Kiritsugu, who had killed his own father and foster mother with his own hands, knew clearly that this girl beside him would soon step onto the road of no return as well. But even so, the more tools he could use the better. One day she would lose her value and be discarded; it would be a rather happy ending if she could actually manage to save the lives of two or more people . . . Kiritsugu gifted this girl with a name, a nationality, and taught her the skills and knowledge he possessed. That was the first beginning of Hisau Maiya, this person whose final destiny had already been decided.

There was no need to sigh or feel a sense of loss here—this was the logical, unquestionable end. He took Maiya's body in his arms. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Her empty gaze wandered until she recognized Kiritsugu's face.

"..."

Not knowing what to say to her, Kiritsugu bit his lip in confusion. Words of gratitude or comfort had no real effect. Anything meaningful he said now would be to the effect of 'you will die here'—relieving her of future assignments, future trouble. If he simply regarded her as a tool to be used, Kiritsugu would definitely be able to say those things. However, no sound could come out of his dry throat. He just stood there dazedly, his lips spasming.

"... No. You can't cry ..."

Kiritsugu did not notice the tears welling up in his eyes, threatening to fall from the corners until Maiya pointed them out.

"You . . . need to save your tears for Madam . . . if you cry here. No . . . you are really weak. If you . . . start to cry now. No way . . ."

"I—" He must have made some fatal error; Kiritsugu felt that acutely now. Functioning as a tool, thinking that even such a fate was acceptable at the end—just as Emiya Kiritsugu had always done, he had always thought the same of Hisau Maiya. But she spoke such words to Kiritsugu. Were there not other ways for her to live or die?

"This morning, you finally . . . returned to the Kiritsugu of the past . . . if you waver over such a small matter. No . . ."

It was true. At this same place, he had embraced a different woman and understood the path he should walk in his life. Just a moment's wavering could overturn that belief. The correct method could achieve an impossible miracle. He reminded himself thus. It had been only half a day.

"—Maiya, rest assured." Kiritsugu said in a suppressed voice as he stared into Maiya's eyes, which were gradually losing their light. "Entrust everything to Saber. Maiya, your task . . . is complete."

Although she had lost her value, the machine that was Emiya Kiritsugu still needed to keep functioning without error. Kiritsugu promised her that. There was no need for her to keep holding on; no need to keep suffering pain, no need to keep thinking; she could let everything go. Hearing this cold declaration, Hisau Maiya gently nodded her head.

"Maiya . . ."

No reply. No words of correction or refusal would ever be voiced again. What lay in Kiritsugu's arms was already an ice-cold corpse.

Rider was evidently escaping toward Shinto. Saber glimpsed his back at intervals, appearing on top of apartment buildings and billboards; perhaps the latter was jumping from one vantage point to another, or did not deliberately hide his movements out of total disregard for Saber's pursuit on foot. If so, he had underestimated his enemy.

Throttle valves fully open, and Saber's spirit spiking, the ferocious two-wheeled beast let out a courageous roar. The 1,400cc V-4 engine rumbled like a cast-iron lion, and the crazed bellowing of the giant carnivore violently shook the silence of night. The mechanical tool Emiya Kiritsugu had prepared was not four-wheeled, but two-wheeled instead, perhaps to maximize Saber's Riding skill. Compared to driven automobiles, which put the driver in a seat constrained by safety belts, it was easier to control balance if the driver became a part of the vehicle itself. A Servant's reinforced skills could only be maximized by riding a motorcycle, with the driver's body exposed to the elements outside.

Of course, if it could be used by a Servant, an existence beyond ordinary humans, it did not matter if the motorcycle's functions ignored the limits of normal drivers. This was originally a ridiculously impractical and hypothetical motorcycle design, but Kiritsugu actually managed to make it a reality.

The basic body of the motorcycle was the Yamaha V-Max, the most powerful bike in the modern world. The characteristics of the original 1,200cc, 140-horsepower engine, which could already work near its limits, were further enhanced. Moreover, the acceleration system had been tuned, making it a monstrous abnormality with an output of 250 horsepower. That was the silver stallion Saber was now riding.

Of course, the two-wheeled design could no longer be expected to function properly after various extreme reinforcements. The wheels had too much torque and could not generate enough friction with the road; they could only spin uselessly. The front wheel would jump up whenever the brakes were applied, and could throw the driver immediately. Saber was steering this monstrous, physically uncontrollable steed perfectly, galloping at full speed. The secret to controlling this motorcycle so willfully lay in her battle skills, which she always took pride in, and the enormous power of her prana bursts. The prana that burst throbbing out of Saber's back urged the crazed vehicle to race along the road, applying its entire horsepower to acceleration; she was reining the vicious beast by raw power rather than skill. Saber, who was of short stature, could only control this 300kg, heavily tuned motorcycle in a precarious driving position. She was practically lying flat on top of the engine, covered by a plastic turbopump, and forced to bear the powerful vibrations of the large engine while she held onto the handlebars. The pose was like a child desperately clinging onto the back of a beast.

However, this trial wasn't particularly painful for Saber. The more untameable the iron beast, the greater the excitement and

vigor she felt. The feeling she got from driving the Mercedes-Benz was nothing compared to this breakneck gallop. Yes, this really felt like riding a horse. Although she was riding a creation of modern technology, her spirit had already returned to memorable battlefields of the past—she had regained the spirit of chivalry from a time when she had held her lance and charged toward the enemy formation.

"If I keep up this speed, maybe—" The distance between her and Rider became larger. That was the difference between a straight-line path across the tops of buildings and a path following the streets. However, there was no need to feel anxious. It was true that a Servant's dexterity was far above that of the V-Max in terms of maximum acceleration and speed. However, this iron beast could maintain its speed as long as there was fuel left. If she was expecting a drawn-out pursuit, the motorcycle would be very advantageous.

The streets of Miyama-chou were huge obstacles for the party pursuing on land. Moreover, this V-Max, which had been completely revamped to achieve the ultimate acceleration, was not any different from those cars modified to compete in high-speed short and straight courses; it had almost no dexterity. However, a Servant's superior skills overturned the impossibility of high-speed cornering, which had no effect on her.

Saber had completely mastered the machine's characteristics. Rather than slowing down around turns, she threw the throttle open and poured all the excess torque into the back wheel. The moment the front wheel drifted up from the intense acceleration and threatened to topple the turning bike sideways, Saber used the

explosive force of prana bursts to forcibly tilt the vehicle and complete the turn; in effect, she was twisting the direction of the vehicle with a mighty and overwhelming blow.

Rider seemed to have passed Mion River and entered Shinto, and she could not see his figure anymore. Without panic, she looked out over the night sky to search for his whereabouts. Rider should have known that Saber, who was already chasing him, would not give up easily. He could not turn into spiritual form to hide, not with Irisviel in his arms. There were only two choices for Rider once he entered Shinto. One was to hide somewhere to avoid Saber's pursuit, and the other was to drag out the distance between himself and Saber using Gordius Wheel. Based on Rider's personality, Saber believed he would choose the latter option. There was no need to be anxious about losing him for the moment. The flying Noble Phantasm, Gordius Wheel, emitted large amounts of prana and would not pass undetected by Saber.

"Following on ground does prove disadvantageous though—" It would be better if she could predict his destination as soon as she spotted Gordius Wheel, and get there before him. Rather than a competition of driving skills, this was in fact a test of the pursuer's senses and hunting skills. Everyone on the road was staring at this roaming V-Max that was overtaking vehicles with stunning speed. Saber completely ignored their looks and focused all of her concentration on the nemesis above her. She could detect obstacles blocking her path through changes in air flow, and would not hit anything even if she closed her eyes.

"—Found him!"

Saber's senses, keen like a wild beast's, detected the prana disturbances in the sky. As if to avoid notice by ordinary humans, Gordius Wheel did not emit its thunderous noise, and its speed also appeared to have slowed. However, this feeling was undoubtedly caused by the prana disturbances created by Rider's Noble Phantasm. It was to the east. He may have been planning to escape from Fuyuki through Shinto.

Saber thought he was probably pushing his luck. If so, she could fully exploit the machine's acceleration using the broad national highway. After passing through the bridge in one go and arriving on the six-lane road, Saber bravely opened the throttle even wider and urged the V-Max forward. The reckless rider was already pushing the tachometer needle past 6,000RPM—at that moment, the engine emitted a surprising sound.

The low rumbling sound of the engine, like that of angry waves, suddenly changed into a deafening and violent high-pitched noise. The sound was even madder, ferociously ripping apart the quietness of the night sky. The acceleration from just a moment ago was incomparable to what it is now. The near-flight speed turned Saber and her motorcycle into a soaring bullet, and the surrounding night scene whooshed past like comets.

That was the moment when the true prana hiding within the iron beast woke. Being a design that utilized the most advanced modern technology, the V-4 drive mechanism could immediately start to function as a two-stroke design when the limit of engine rotation was reached, increasing its air intake to achieve ultimate acceleration. This was the unique design of the V-Max. Originally, a machine using two cylinders would never have such

a structure, but this design had already completely surpassed the limits of a motorcycle.

As she endured the air resistance, which approached the force of water pressure, Saber hung on to the body of the motorcycle with all her strength—and yet could not help breaking out in a peerless smile. This motorcycle had already surpassed its limit as a tool of man. This was an alien creation born through advanced modern technology. The loneliness and sadness of the realization brought empathy rather than sympathy. Only an inhuman Servant could release the machine's true potential. This motorcycle must been given life just for Saber to ride it that night.

"—All right, then gallop yourself out!" Saber roared loudly in the bellowing wind, and opened the throttle valves even wider. The speedometer had already passed 300KPH, and was still climbing slowly. The brilliance of the flood lights no longer seemed like a light that belonged to the ground; it could almost illuminate the sky.

"Rider. Hey, she . . . couldn't have caught up with us, right?" Waver was the first to notice the situation and pointed under the driver's seat with his hand. Rider gave a downward glance toward the direction his Master was pointing at and lifted his eyebrows, rather surprised.

"Huh? I was just wondering who it might be, and it turned out to be Saber. I'll be spared the trouble of finding her . . . Say, kid, are these motorcycle things this fast?"

"That's . . . a motorcycle?" Waver's sight only registered it as a bright dot. The speed of the moving dot was incommensurate with those of motorcycles he could comprehend with his normal logic.

"No, that's impossible … however, it is definitely possible through Saber's skills. From that perspective, perhaps …"

"Hmph, she dares to challenge me, one who possesses the mighty title of Rider." Rider gave off a ferocious smile as if satisfied. "Haha, this is so interesting. Since she's caught up with us, we don't need to go into that weird forest anymore … I'll have one heck of a good fight with her." Rider grasped the divine bulls' reins and suddenly slowed the war chariot's speed.

"Hey, are we landing?!"

"I changed my mind. I have decided to battle that little girl of ordinary wheels. There's still a long way to go to get through the forest in front of us, right? This will be the most ideal battleground!"

Waver originally wanted to complain about giving away their advantage of height and falling into Saber's trap. However, Waver remembered the power of Excalibur he had seen the day before yesterday. From the characteristics exhibited by Saber's Noble Phantasm, the further away they were from her, the more dangerous it would get. It would probably be safer to have a close-range melee battle that could limit the destructive power of the enemy's Noble Phantasm.

"All right, that's decided then. You should be careful!"

"Hahaha! Kid, you've finally understood the exquisite taste of battle. Don't worry! Nothing in heaven and on earth can hinder me in my path!"

Fortunately, there were no ordinary vehicles on the national highway at the moment. Although the meandering tarmac mountain road was not well-suited for battle, they would not have

to worry about hurting innocent bystanders. Gordius Wheel finally landed 200m in front of the approaching Saber and proudly proceeded on the road, preparing for the ensuing attack from its challenger.

– 36:44:26

On a faraway building, three pairs of eyes watched Rider's flying Noble Phantasm as it appeared in the airspace above Shinto city, as well as Saber, who changed her route to pursue him. One pair of eyes expressed satisfaction. One pair of eyes was extremely fatigued. And one more pair—could those eyes, filled with violent frenzy, still belong to a human?

"I did not think the real Rider would actually appear . . . This is truly a good show. Matou Kariya, you often bring luck to your companions on the battlefield." Kotomine Kirei said this with a smile and a slight implication of sarcasm. At the same time, he slapped Kariya's shoulder to indicate admiration. Kariya's good right eye regarded him with suspicion.

"Father . . . do you think it is worth wasting two Command Seals on such a small matter?" Kariya looked at his right hand, which was missing two Command Seals, with some dissatisfaction. Kirei said to him, smiling.

"There is no need to worry, Kariya. As long as you are willing to help me, you need not worry about wasting Command Seals—come, stretch out your hand." Kirei caught hold of Kariya's veined and withered right hand, softly chanting a spell while tracing the mark of the Command Seals with his own hand. At his small ministration, the darkened Command Seals immediately regained their light and returned to the previous shape of three marks.

"You . . . really—"

"Did I not already tell you? I accepted the duty of Supervisor, so I have the right to redistribute the Command Seals in the Church's safekeeping at will."

Kariya was unable to surmise the other's true intentions; he regarded Kirei unabashedly, then glanced with a sigh at his own Servant. The large silhouette standing behind him was that of Rider, King of Conquerors, Alexander. The crimson mantle, curly red hair, and burly physique were just like the driver of the chariot that had sped out of Fuyuki City with Saber. The only difference was the pair of eerie blood-red eyes radiating resentment. Undoubtedly, this was a characteristic unique to a Mad Enhanced Servant.

Wrapped in his thick-set arms was the slender body of Irisviel, who had lost consciousness and was still in a coma. This 'Rider' was the true culprit who had kidnapped the Guardian of the Holy Grail from the underground storage which Maiya protected, and had also lured Saber to give chase toward Shinto.

"... That is enough, Berserker." Kariya nodded. The large body of the King of Conquerors turned into a pitch-black fog as if burnt, then reverted to the armored figure filled with an ominous air. The dark energy that imitated Rider's appearance twined about his hands and legs, obscuring small parts of the black armor. Seeing Berserker returned to his original form, Kirei said groaningly.

"This sort of transformation ability ... It is truly wasted as a Noble Phantasm at Berserker's level. He initially had the ability to transform into many other Heroic Spirits of greater merit in

military exploits. But Mad Enhancement has reduced it to mere imitation."

The black fog entwined about Berserker's entire body was originally a Noble Phantasm which could not only disguise him, but also mimic any person in order to deceive the enemies' ears and eyes. Since Berserker had been stripped of his rationality, this ability could not be brought into play. Kariya had forced this ability to manifest through the power of the Command Seals and made it possible to disguise Berserker as a fake Rider. But this ability could only be used once.

"Ar . . . ur . . ."

Berserker stared after Saber's motorcycle headlight beams, which headed gradually further into the east, his gaze full of hatred. A bone-deep hatred caused his shoulders to shake ceaselessly, the armor chafing with a creaking sound, but he did not do anything else out of the ordinary. That was due to the binding of the ultimate command, the second Command Seal that Kariya had used—*capture Irisviel, and let Saber escape.* To make Berserker, who was unusually stubborn when it came to Saber, follow his instructions, it was necessary to restrict him. Those shackles seemed extremely difficult to endure for Berserker. Although his task was now complete, the black knight seemed like a mechanical part that had malfunctioned; his limbs continuously convulsed, stubbornly resisting this command.

Kariya felt a chill run down his back at Berserker's willfulness. As Berserker fell into a state of uncontrollability, Kariya forcefully cut off the prana connection with him. The Servant immediately reverted to spirit form, and Irisviel's body, losing its

support, was violently thrown to the rooftop floor. On impact, the sleeping homunculus gave a soft groan of pain, but nevertheless did not open her eyes. Forcefully kidnapped from the Magic Circle whence she rested, Irisviel's awareness had thinned even more.

"Is this woman really the Vessel of the Holy Grail?"

"To be precise, this *homunculus;* When one or two more Servants are done for, it will probably show its true form. I will prepare the ritual to receive the Grail as it descends. Until that time, this woman will also be temporarily under my protection."

The robed man picked up the weak body of the woman; Kariya wordlessly communicated his question with his eyes. Kirei noticed his gaze and replied as before, with a leisurely and self-satisfied smile. "Don't worry. I will give you the Grail as per our agreement. I have no need to pursue that wish-granting machine."

"Before that, you seem to also have promised me another thing, Father."

"Ah, that . . . Of course, there is no problem. You just have to come to the church at midnight tonight. I will let you meet Tousaka Tokiomi then."

Exactly what did this priest intend?—It troubled Kariya's heart that he was unable to discern Kirei's true intention all this time. Though Kotomine Kirei had once been a disciple under Tousaka Tokiomi, for the sake of participating in the Heaven's Feel he had left him to take part in Heaven's Feel and become a Master—a hypocrite. But from the perspective of the Matou family which had also participated in the previous Heaven's Feel, the collusion between the Tousaka house and the Church had long been known.

It was also obvious that this son of the Supervisor, who was also an Executor of the Church, had summoned Assassin as Tokiomi's lackey.

At noon today, Kirei suddenly came running to the Matou house, hoping to discuss an alliance. According to him, the responsibility for Supervisor Kotomine Risei's death was Tousaka's; as his son, it was necessary for him to avenge his father, and he wished to kill Tokiomi with the hand of the Matous. Kariya was suspicious, but the conditions laid out were truly too alluring.

Not only had Kirei planned to trap Tokiomi, he had also investigated the hiding location of Einsbern, protector of the Vessel of the Grail, and secretly succeeded the right to safekeep the Command Seals as Supervisor; he held the most important trump card to the latter half of the Heaven's Feel. To Kariya, holding the ticking time bomb known as Berserker, isolated and unable to trust even his own kin, Kirei's assistance was greater than an army of thousands; his heart was immediately grounded. However, the condition was that he had to trust everything this man Kotomine Kirei said.

Kotomine Kirei could ensure that the homunculus of the Einsbern family was in his hands. He even generously replenished his consumed Command Seals ... Still, Kariya was unable to completely trust this priest, whose smile appeared leisurely and self-satisfied. His attitude was truly too relaxed. Perhaps the confidence brought about by the secret he held was the most important deciding factor. But from a straightforward perspective, that indicated he had no sense of danger in the face of battle, or a

sense of anxiety in the consideration of tactics. That smile was like that of an excited child playing a game. In the name of betraying his benefactor to avenge his father, this man had formed an alliance with him. It was very obvious that this man found great delight in this sort of situation . . .

"It will be too suspicious if both of us appear at the same time. Kariya, why don't you go back first?"

". . . And you?"

"I still have some small matters to settle . . . Don't forget, Kariya. Tonight, at midnight, your wish shall be accomplished." The priest seemed more concerned than Kariya about the whole affair, reminding Kariya again with great anticipation. Kariya once again regarded his smile with a suspicious gaze, then slowly turned around and walked toward the rooftop staircase.

Without the slightest carelessness, Kotomine Kirei listened closely to his ally's footsteps fading into the distance. Confirming that the sound of footsteps had entirely disappeared, he moved to a corner of the rooftop and shifted his gaze to a discarded pile covered by many sheets of water-resistant material.

". . . I have sent him away. I don't know who you are, but isn't it about time you revealed yourself?"

This voice carried an authority that did not permit compromise. After a period of silence, Suppressed, hair-raising laughter rang out in the icy night air.

"Oh, already noticed, have you? Indeed, you are an Executor who has experienced battle. Much more sensitive than that kid Kariya."

From the darkness appeared a shadow without definite form. At first glance, Kirei even thought it to be a large pile of worms—a thought to chill anyone—but the bright moonlight immediately dispelled this misconception; it was an old man, thin and small of stature, who quietly walked out.

"Executor, worry not. I am not your enemy. I am kin of that kid who is cooperating with you."

At the name, a face appeared in Kirei's mind.

"Matou Zouken . . . is it not?"

"Indeed. You even know my name. It seems that Tousaka instructs his disciples well." The old magus quirked a corner of the lips deeply hidden in wrinkles, revealing an inhuman smile.

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The darkness spread about the mountain road was thicker than evening; it seemed to be night already. In the darkness, black as ink, one would not see a hand placed before one's face. Brilliant headlights ripped this patch of darkness apart. Saber was still riding the steel beast as if her life depended on it.

She had taken this path when escorting Einsbern out of the city. It had been Irisviel driving then; on the return trip, it was Saber who tightly gripped the steering wheel of the Mercedes-Benz, sure of the road. Twice was enough for Saber, whose memory was above average. The width of the road, the angle of inclination, even when to make a turn—she could clearly recall it all.

She saw that Rider's Gordius Wheel had only just descended from high in the air and landed somewhere far away. For some unknown reason, the King of Conquerors had not continued to flee, but had landed on the ground, seemingly intent to respond to Saber's challenge of ground riding skills.

His air of heroism was immiscible with his sneak kidnapping of Irisviel, but perhaps that was exactly the conflict between Rider and his Master. The actions of Servants restricted by the contract often brought about many contradictory results; this was not surprising. Saber herself had experienced the exact same thing through her conflict with Emiya Kiritsugu. It therefore pleased Saber greatly that Rider could make a decision based on his own agenda in this final battleground. Between these two fast-moving riders, Kiritsugu had no way of interfering even if he wanted to. This was something she wished for. The crux of the problem lay somewhere else—the vibration of the handlebars she was tightly gripping sent a message of danger.

The man-made V-Max had already fully manifested all its ability, but rolling just ahead was a quick-moving Noble Phantasm that transcended normalcy. Although the V-Max was already being towed along by Saber's internal prana, the strength of its material composition and structure was definitely limited. The engine and acceleration system, which from the city to here had been continuously taxed to their limits, were already showing signs of breakdown. Saber's excellent driving made her aware of this as well as she would have known an extension of her own physical body. It was already possible to clearly hear the dejected cry of the engine almost reaching its limit.

"It'll be terrible if this goes on . . ."

If she could decelerate, this would not be a concern, but if forced to continue at such high speed, the vehicle would fall apart in a few minutes. If no measures were taken to reinforce the frame's load capacity . . . Saber herself had difficulty judging the feasibility of the plan which flashed momentarily into her mind, but there was no time for hesitation. Making up her mind, Saber entrusted everything to her potential as a Servant. She would fuse her full-body platinum armor with the body of the V-Max through intense psychokinesis, using it like steed armor to protect her beloved horse on the battlefield. For that unified sensation of riding, she would make this wordless steel beast her own limbs. Continuously releasing her prana, she covered and reinforced the various critical components of the V-Max, increased its capability.

"—This is great!"

Such usage of prana was unexpected, but Saber's great skill made this difficult task possible. The entire structure of the V-Max was wrapped in brand-new silver armor, beautiful and majestic to behold. The structure of the vehicle could now withstand that monstrous, extraordinary horsepower; this time, the mechanical lion had finally become a real magical beast. The exhaust pipe thundered.

Saber released Invisible Air like an arrow directly before her, enveloping the body of the vehicle. Using the compression of the pneumatic umbrella to decrease air resistance to zero, the V-Max was finally released from air resistance. The needle of the speedometer was already damaged and could not be used. Saber's prana allowwed the rushing vehicle to transcend common laws of

reality; its speed was already over 400KPH. Pressure released by the magecraft pressed the rear wheel firmly against the cement; even when making turns, Saber did not release the throttle, twisting the body of the vehicle round by sheer force. *Like this, it might even be possible*—it made Saber extremely excited to have captured this thread of victory through such effort.

The distance to Gordius Wheel gradually shortened. It had been only a point of light, but now it was possible to discern the entire thundering vehicle, which released lightning bolts and was also making turns at high speeds. On the other side, Waver, who had been sitting in the charioteer's seat since they touched down, was constantly watching the rear. Seeing the brilliant headlights of the approaching motorcycle, he could not help but hold his breath; he tugged at Rider's cape.

"Rider, she'll catch up to us at this rate! Eh, idiot, look out behind!"

Hearing Waver's frantic voice, Rider snorted. As a Heroic Spirit who had appeared in this world and gained the throne of Rider, even without turning back he could clearly feel the presence of Saber gradually closing in.

"What a character, this Saber. I cannot help but praise her for this feat of catching up in such a gizmo. On the other hand . . ." Rider roared, the corner of his lips twisting, revealing the smile that had always seemed somewhat sinister. "Sorry, but this is a war chariot. Now I can no longer play nicely in this competition of speed!"

Rider slid the enormous structure of the car to one side of the road. On both sides of Gordius Wheel, dimensions greater than a

truck, were fixed two large, fiercely curved sickles. The highway on which Rider now sped were flanked by dense forests that almost camouflaged the route. If he rode the edge of the paved road, the sickle blade would definitely pass into the lush green forest.

"Pursue me if you can, Saber!" The electrified wheels of the chariot crushed the forest like mere paper; Rider had begun a brutal logging. Though the tree trunks were thick, sharp sickles flying at 400KPH sawed through them easily. The broken trunks snapped back and were swept into the air. The sight of shredded wood shavings sent flying was nightmarish when scaled a few hundred times.

At this tremendous scene of destruction, Saber could not help but hold her breath. "Damn it . . .!" Swept into the air, the trees descended like rain upon their target, Saber, who was catching up from behind. At this speed, even brushing the handlebar would mean death, to say nothing of being hit. Deceleration was impossible; this was not a test that could be avoided by retreat. The only path for survival was to rush on forward. Saber made up her mind; preparing herself, she rushed into the rain of continuously falling trees without any timidity whatsoever.

They fell toward the ground like an avalanche. The V-Max advanced in a snake-like twisting manner, passing through narrow spaces. To Saber, braking was an act of stupidity; instead of decelerating, she made use of the momentum from acceleration to pull the front wheel off the ground, relying only on the rear wheel to maintain balance and perform the consummate stunt of controlling a motorcycle using magecraft alone. The beautiful

wheelie dance incited Waver to stare, completely forgetting his fear; a very satisfied smile broke out on Rider's face.

"Hahahahaha! Fabulous! Indeed the King of Knights of consummate dignity! Only you are worthy to be named flower of the battlefield!" Laughing, Rider continued to deftly slide the chariot from side to side, closing in on the next object to be cut down.

"Here I come again—next up after the trees is a rain of stones!"

The next target of the sickles was the solid asphalt and concrete that covered the surface of the road. Rock, though much denser and harder than tree trunks, was nevertheless crushed into rubble mercilessly and sent them flying in all directions like droplets, blocking Saber's way—a fatal baptism of rocks much more lethal than tree trunks. But Saber stared ahead bravely, the corners of her mouth suddenly curving into an undefeatable smile.

"King of Conquerors, you underestimate me!"

Rocks were more dangerous than tree trunks only if they hit. If she could dodge it all, it made no difference if it were raining rockets or bullets. Saber entrusted her last hope for victory to the V-Max, passing through the gaps between stone and concrete with valiant, yet beautifully skilled riding. On the other side, Rider's war chariot, sweeping the surface of the road with its large sickles, was already unable to accelerate. Concrete was much more difficult to cut through than tree trunks, and posed a significant obstruction to the divine bulls.

Saber's sixth sense predicted a divine opportunity for victory. From then on, the priority was to pass through the next few successive tests safe and unharmed; there would definitely be a

chance to rise again from death. A large concrete slab that had broken off the surface of the road now obstructed the path of the V-Max. Measuring more than two meters in length and breadth, it was just like a stone screen. Saber's gaze was unwavering; riding the V-Max forward, she raised Invisible Air over the edge.

"Cha—rge!" The clump of air pressure, supported by prana and possessing a momentum that could sweep an army of thousands —struck top of the stone slab with great impact, flinging the slab of several tons into the air. Spinning rapidly in midair, the stone slab fell forward in a fatal parabola that traced a path to the war chariot. Hearing Waver's terrible scream, Rider turned his head. Raising his sword, he stared wide-eyed at the rock over his head. "Aa—h!" Rider boldly brandished the bronze sword level with the stone slab in bold declaration of his superior strength. The slab's trajectory was changed once again, spinning even more wildly in midair. At last, it fell like a boomerang, embedding itself deeply in the surface of the road behind the chariot.

Saber's entire body was electrified by a revelation. The concrete slab was embedded in the asphalt at an inclination of about 30°, the smooth side facing the sky like a key that foretold victory. "Now is a good time—" Under the thumb of her right hand which gripped the throttle tightly was a button she had always been acutely aware of. Though she did not know the button's function, she understood its effect; that was its hidden secret. Without the slightest hesitation, Saber pushed the red button, and the two-wheeled beast let out a provoked roar.

Within the engine, inside the valve that had switched to atomization mode and filled with oxide fuel, the nitrous oxide expanded at 300°C, reaching dangerous pressure levels. The V-Max leapt forward with twofold acceleration. Saber wrestled control of the vehicle with great strength, aiming for the slope before her eyes. The front wheel hit the concrete slab with creaking sounds of protest, then the body was propelled upward, and the bike flew high into the air—

Rider definitely had not anticipated this. Complacently flying his Noble Phantasm in midair, he had not expected to see the enemy appear right above his head. As the chariot slowed, Saber finally found Rider's weak spot through a serendipitous encounter with a springboard slope and great acceleration from the V-Max's turbocharger. This position above the enemy's head gave absolute advantage in crossing blades. This was indeed the grace of the goddess of victory given to the sword-wielding Heroic Spirit; this was a chance at certain victory.

"Die, Rider!" But Invisible Air, lifted as she gambled everything with this one blow, slowed slightly with hesitation. Rider raised his own blade to block. Saber should have had a greater chance of victory due to the advantage of her position, but the outcome was an even match. Invisible Air could not break past Rider's defenses, and was finally deflected away. There was no opportunity for the swords to clash again, not between Gordius Wheel and the falling V-Max. Saber released the speed from the instantaneous prana release, sustaining the balance of the vehicle in midair with great difficulty. As the rear wheel touched the

ground, all the force of impact was absorbed by the rubber tire and suspension.

Thus was an excellent opportunity to seize victory lost in vain, but Saber's unease had other causes—"Einsbern is not here?!" There was no mistake. In the instant that the V-Max had leaped, she had not spotted anyone in the charioteer's seat of Gordius Wheel aside from the driver and his Master. Where had Irisviel, kidnapped from the underground storage, been taken?

Saber braked with all her strength, restraining the over-300kg vehicle. The tires skidded on the surface of the ground, stopping the violent revolutions of the two wheels. All this time, she had pursued Rider without the slightest hesitation, but now clouds of doubt surfaced in her chest.

What was Rider's destination? From the city street, he had moved east to pass through the national highway ... His final destination was the Einsbern forest. Rider had already taken this path once, holding a bottle of wine. After kidnapping Irisviel, why would he specifically choose an escape route that led to the enemy's territory? Feeling a chill that made her restless, Saber gritted her teeth.

What if this was not an escape? And how would Rider's Master have known about the underground cellar at Miyama?—Indeed, he could not have known. He must have thought Saber's group was still in that forested citadel, and blindly rode his chariot there in the middle of the night. Who was it, then, who had attacked Maiya and kidnapped Irisviel in the underground storage? The truth was still unclear, but now an intense premonition rushed into Saber's heart at the realization that she had been tricked. That

feeling made her restless; the culprit who had set them up might be fleeing with Irisviel even now, while she was facing off against Rider. She could not stay here any longer; she had to return to Shinto as quickly as possible.

Yet, though this judgment was entirely accurate, Saber did not move. There was a tense aura about her body, like the heralding wind of a coming storm; no needless motion was permitted. She gazed at the danger before her eyes, taking her stance and preparing to go all out at any time. About a hundred meters away, Rider's chariot also came to a stop. Saber had been trailing in its dust all this while, but now it had turned to face her. The eyes of the two divine bulls, and of their master, were filled with the joy of battle; he looked upon Saber with a captivating gaze. Rider's intentions were clear—he intended to fight. His eyes had not the slightest shadow of deception or scheming; he had truly been set up. The fires of rage burned in the eyes of the King of Conquerors, declaring his full intention to return all punishment that would be dealt him. His situation was different from Saber's; he had not been led into a trap, and was not opposed to the current situation. If she ignored Rider and returned to Fuyuki City, she would definitely be attacked from behind while unprepared. She had to make her choice now. Her small hands gripped the hilt of her sword.

Waver huddled on the charioteer's seat of Gordius Wheel; beside him, he could feel Rider's battle eagerness at its peak. His target was just ahead, a hundred or so meters away. Saber, riding on the large motorcycle, stared their way with a serious expression. She had chased Rider fervently from Shinto to here;

why would she suddenly stop now? But Rider had not taken the opportunity to flee either; he turned the chariot around and pull it to a halt, intent on a confrontation; a showdown with Saber had been Rider's intention from the start. If the other party gave up the pursuit, they would have to take the initiative. But—though Waver was not very mature, he still bore the burden of being a Master; he bit his lip, feeling restless and uneasy. The distance, and the position; it was all terrible.

Saber's Noble Phantasm, which had taken Caster's life at Mion River—having witnessed the Sword of Promised Victory, the situation was clear at a glance. The straight road was unobstructed, and there was no worry of involving innocent bystanders. Without a doubt, the situation was uniquely advantageous for Saber's Noble Phantasm. Small things of this magnitude would not have gone unnoticed by a war veteran like Rider. He had also witnessed the might of Saber's Noble Phantasm at Mion River. Although his judgment was more often based on emotion than reason, in matters of war strategy, this Servant would not judge wrongly. Had they harnessed Gordius Wheel's speed, perhaps they could have evaded for a while. But for some unknown reason, Rider abandoned his advantage of mobility and confront Saber directly instead.

"Hey, Rider . . ."

"Nn. Even to you, my Master, I must make this clear." Seeing through Waver's doubt, Rider broke into an irrepressible smile; nevertheless, his gaze never shifted from Saber as he said to the youth beside him. "From now on, I will put aside my thoughts of

winning the Grail; I intend to raise the stakes. If you wish to use a Command Seal to stop me, now would be the time."

Knowing the haughty personality of this Servant, he could understand his intention. A rational Master would definitely use the power of the Command Seal to stop him; the Servant himself knew this as well, but wished to act recklessly anyway. Was this the case?

"You . . . are you really going to initiate the attack? From this angle? . . . Rush straight over?"

"When Saber takes her stance and prepares to use that sword of light we had seen, we shall see if my Gordius Wheel can cross this distance in that time. This is what we are contesting."

Waver's expression changed drastically; he began to recalculate the distance between both sides. It would be just in time; this was so alarmingly dangerous. Comparing the time he remembered it would take Saber to activate her Noble Phantasm, and the acceleration of Rider's Noble Phantasm . . . it was difficult to guess the final result. The distance between them was really very opportune.

". . . How sure are you of victory, Rider?"

"About half."

The King of Conquerors replied with a dignified air and relaxed tone. To one who managed military affairs, this statistic was not very optimistic—if the chance of victory was half, the chance of failure was also half. It was as absurd as flipping a coin to decide between life and death. This sort of thing was definitely not strategy; at best, it was gambling with one's life. Only under

conditions in which there was no other way out would one adopt such foolish action.

"Why do you seek . . . such irresponsibility?"

"Because of its nature." The Servant said softly, showing a somewhat sinister smile; his eyes were filled with belief in victory, yet gazed fixedly upon an uncertain future of which he was only fifty percent assured.

"If a challenge is made under such conditions, with both sides evenly matched, the losing side will have no excuse or dignity. This is truly an ultimate defeat. I don't think her sword can bring me down with her cleverness. If I can completely defeat her in this way, perhaps she will fear her own incompetence, become my subordinate, and serve me."

Waver furrowed his brow; he could only sigh. There were truly no words that could be said. That was all there was to it. Compared to the war centered around the Holy Grail, they placed even greater importance on open and clean competition between themselves as Heroic Spirits.

". . . You . . . want to win against Saber so much that you are willing to do something like this?"

"Mn, indeed, I would like that very much." Rider nodded his head without the slightest hesitation. "On the battlefield, she is certainly a star on earth. Rather than letting her make those jokes about whether or not she is actually an ideal king, it is better that she emit true light as my subordinate."

This despot had defeated countless nobility and war generals; ignoring their power and wealth, he had obtained their souls. It was for this reason that people called him the King of Conquerors.

He did not eliminate the enemy, nor belittle them; he subdued a standing opponent—this was what he thought was the true form of victory. What right had one who relied on the Grail for a contract to be concerned with the righteousness of this approach?

"... Forget it, Rider. If you can win by your methods, that's fine too." Waver gave up, exhaling his frustration. This was not a case of sending the helve after the hatchet. To Rider, whose prana had been replenished through a day of rest, this was an excellent opportunity to issue a challenge, one that would not come again. There was no guarantee that his physical condition would be any better in a future confrontation. Instead of believing in a statistical chance of victory, it was better to place his bet on Rider's fighting spirit. It was better to let him do things on his own grounds instead of convincing him by logic—that transcendent personality, afraid of neither heaven nor earth, formed a chance of victory one could believe in. Waver's expression was serious as he convinced himself with these reasons. Rider maintained a confident smile.

"Hehe, kid, you seem to be starting to understand this idea of supremacy." His confidence was not hollow. Though he had said that it was a large gamble, Rider himself had full confidence in his victory. "Light is at the other end of the world—conquer! Via Expugnatio • Distant Trampling Domination!"

Its true name now released, the chariot drawn by divine bulls burst forth, trailing lightning. The majestic braying of the divine bulls, whose feet had trampled Berserker in the first battle, could never compare to this.

"—Let the wind come!" Seeing her opponent rush toward her, Saber also hurriedly pulled out her sword from under the protection of the air pressure. Opening the vortex of the hurricane, a golden light shone forth to radiate the knight's kingship; prana thundered continuously.

"A—lalalalalaie!" Accompanying Rider's roar, the bulls stomped once on the asphalt ground; their cloven hooves rushed forward like raging billows. Waver, though overwhelmed by their majesty, nevertheless made an utmost effort to open his eyes wide, so as not to pass out again like the last time. At the fore was a very strong anti-fortress Noble Phantasm about to be released; Rider rushed forth to gain the initiative as if his life depended on it, unwilling to give up an opportunity to defeat Saber. The King of Conquerors' direct attack sent a shiver down Saber's spine. The rushing of the divine bulls had covered the hundred-meter distance instantaneously. In the blink of an eye, the might of Gordius Wheel manifested before her eyes. If the hilt of her precious sword had still been in her hand, she would have been certain of victory; facing the golden radiance raised by Rider, there was only one true name she could shout.

"Ex—" As the rushing incarnation of thunder was about to trample Saber's small frame . . . "—Calibur!" Golden lightning, with the radiance of countless comets, lit up the night like day.

"—!"

Waver's gaze was drawn and dazzled, and he could not help but turn around. Under the intense attack, his calm rationalization brought him to a realization—he had witnessed the light of Saber's Noble Phantasm, and that meant . . . before Gordius

Wheel had taken its final step, the King of Knights had initiated her attack. But the thickset arm that extended all the way to his shoulder nevertheless did not disappear. His awareness of his own defeat meant he was still alive and clearheadedly conscious. Waver gingerly opened his eyes and saw the appalling condition of the battlefield.

Excalibur's blow had scorched away the surface of the road; even the forest a distance away had been blown to waste. A scar was carved into the highway, a single straight line. The molten asphalt gave off a pungent, revolting stench. Waver felt his body floating through space ... no, carried by a strong man on his shoulders. The man carrying his young Master like a small luggage bag needed no identification.

"Ah ... we've failed." Rider said softly, as if remorseful from the heart. In the current situation, it seemed too much of an understatement. Rider was not hurt either, but the chariot and the two divine bulls had vanished without a trace. Gordius Wheel had borne the might of the Sword of Promised Victory, leaving nary a speck of dust. At the gates of death, Rider had understood his failure and quickly plucked Waver from the charioteer's seat, narrowly escaped the assault of the anti-fortress Noble Phantasm. The price for this defeat was high. But it was not yet over. Even if Gordius Wheel had been taken away, the King of Conquerors still had one last real trump card. Wilfully dispelling his frustration at failure, Waver commanded.

"Rider! Use Ionioi Hetairoi—"

But Rider shook his head lightly, though firmly. The King of Conquerors did not dismiss his foresight regarding the latter half

of the war, which had come to mind during his rest. Against an opponent like Saber, it was best to use the chariot. The summoning of the Hetairoi, which could only be activated once, had to be saved for the showdown with Archer. No matter how strong he was or how unwilling to admit his defeat, engaging in a battle of blades without motive power was advantageous for Saber. Though the Servants differed vastly in body build, their battle transcended normalcy; Saber's seemingly weak frame concealed monstrous fighting ability. Waver was well aware of this, and Rider likewise. But the King of Conquerors did not look at all afraid; he confronted Saber openly with raised sword, harboring not the slightest inclination of retreat.

In this closely matched staring competition, it was Saber who lost first. She slid the wind-wrapped sword back into its sheath, then opened the throttle and slid the rear wheel around, quickly accelerating away toward Fuyuki city in a roar of exhaust, with her back to Rider. This was done in one smooth motion, with such speed that no weakness was revealed. This was certainly unexpected for Waver and Rider. Saber had no time for a showdown; she had to find the culprit who set them up, and snatch Irisviel back from him, even at the cost of settling this showdown. She disappeared from sight in the blink of an eye, leaving only the fading roar of a motorcycle heading away, while Waver and Rider stood there stupefied. Rider, who had been listening intensely to the sound of the exhaust, nodded, showing a knowing expression.

"A motorcycle . . . Nn, it is truly a good thing."

"You—after your defeat, this is really the first thing you have to say?" In the aftermath of battle, all the strength had drained out of Waver's body. Angrily questioning Rider, he suddenly became aware of an important problem, and grew dismayed.

"Hey, Rider—how are we ever going to get back?"

"Ah, that . . . We shall have to walk."

"—Yeah." In the darkness, Waver gazed upon Shinto which shone with light in the distance, and sighed heavily.

– 36:38:09

Matou Zouken—The man before him was the mastermind of the Matou family, a presence known but never seen. Kotomine Kirei's senses could not help but go on alert. The diminutive figure had deliberately chosen a dark corner of the night street, unilluminated by the lights. Despite his shriveled and aged appearance, this man was an extremely dangerous entity; Tokiomi had told Kirei this time after time. Although he had publicly declared that he was retired and no longer cared for the businesses of the outside world, he was an abnormality that covertly used the secret arts of magecraft to prolong his life and rule over the Matou house for generations. In a way, he was far more dangerous than the actual Master of the family, Kariya. Special attention had to be paid to this old crony.

"Kotomine Kirei. I heard that you're the son of that stubborn and honest Risei. Is that so?"

"That is true." Kirei nodded in acknowledgement.

"Hmph—what a surprise. It is often said that heroes come from the most unexpected places. There must be some truth to it. I didn't think that man could sire a son as wily and deceitful as you."

"What do you want, Matou Zouken?" Ignoring the old magus's provocation, Kirei demanded an answer. "You should be on Kariya's side, so why did you have to hide here and eavesdrop on us?"

"What are you talking about? I'm just a parent worried about his child. I wanted to see with my own eyes what kind of helper that child Kariya got for himself." He deliberately pretended to smile like a doting grandfather, but that skeletal, shriveled countenance was definitely not a normal human's. The structure of his face could never have made such a smile. "I heard everything you said to Kariya to appease him. You seem to want to get rid of the son of the Tousaka house."

"That is true. That man killed my father—"

"Be quiet. Don't repeat such a lie." Those deep-set eyes, buried in wrinkles, glistened with a keen light and stared at Kirei. "Kotomine Kirei, you've gone too far with your petty trickery. You even dared to act behind Tousaka's back; you've overstepped your boundaries. You don't need Kariya's hand to kill Tokiomi at all, not since the moment you decided to get rid of him. You must have prepared for every eventuality—I'm not so old that I'm turning senile. You might be able to trick Kariya, but don't you dare think you can trick me too."

Kirei quietly raised his evaluation of this old magus in his mind, but he maintained his mask of calm.

"Your goal isn't the son of the Tousaka house, but Kariya himself. Isn't it?"

"... If you doubt me so, why didn't you stop Kariya?"

A bone-chilling creaking sound, like the muted chirping of a hoard of insects, resonated. It took some time for Kirei to understand that it was the sound of his suppressed laughter.

"Hmm, how should I say this . . . you could say it's simply out of curiosity. I am interested to see what methods you would use to destroy Kariya."

"... Zouken, can you really watch Kariya, who is fighting for the Matou house, have his chance at victory whittled away?"

"Kariya's chance at victory? Hmph, such a thing never existed. If such trash could obtain the Holy Grail, the past three bouts of slaughter would be comedy indeed."

"I don't quite understand. Isn't the Matou house also one of the Three Families of the Beginning, and one that craves the Holy Grail?"

At Kirei's question, Zouken gave a cold snort. "I think that Tousaka boy and those of the Einsbern house are all idiots. Had they remembered the details of the previous war, they should understand that there is something odd in this fourth Heaven's Feel. I have seen through it from the start. Truth be told, the sight of that despicable Caster at the start of the War should have alerted us that the summoning did not call forth Heroic Spirits, but evil spirits, far from heroes. Undoubtedly, something has begun to err within the system of Heaven's Feel. We need to resolve this first."

This odd man, who had overcome ordinary humanity, had likely been present in every single Heaven's Feel. Matou Zouken had grasped something that even the previous Supervisor, Kotomine Risei, had not known about.

"Then why did you let Kariya and Berserker participate? If you only wanted to watch from the sidelines, why did you even prepare a Servant?"

"That's not the reason. Although there were some questionable elements to it, it is still a grand ceremony held every sixty years, after all. It would not be interesting to watch the children fumble around, so I found a unique way to enjoy the event." Zouken said with a tone of ridicule. His mouth tilted even more, into a smile. "Of course, if that failure had really grabbed the Grail, that would be the best outcome. Despite my words, I really am impatient. Seeing Kariya, who betrayed me, suffer in pain day by day—I honestly can't get enough of it. I desire the Matou house's victory, but I'm also tempted by the thought of observing Kariya's defeated and helpless end. How conflicted I am!"

Zouken's hoarse laughter was piercing to Kirei's ears. How much better it would have been, had they met on the battlefield and fought for their lives, not with words, but with swords? He could not help thinking that even if Zouken was a very dangerous old magus, his existence was really unbearable.

While Kirei tried his best to hide his thoughts, Zouken lifted his eyebrows in seemingly deliberate mockery. "Ahhh, how surprising. I thought you would've been able to understand my joy."

"—What did you say?"

"I may look old, Kotomine Kirei, but my nose is still sensitive. You have the same smell as I. You're like a maggot that crawled here, attracted by the piece of rotting meat that Kariya is."

Kirei remained silent, but slowly drew his Black Keys from his frock. He knew he could no longer persuade the old magus with reason; they would have to fight to the death. Zouken had stepped into his range; he had crossed territorial boundaries at risk to his

life. To keep his vitals safe, he could only use a killing strike, attacking the enemy head-on without any warning. If Zouken had thought of evading that strike at his vitals—an inevitable kill—he would have no other choice but to confront Zouken directly. Right now, Matou Zouken had already crossed that line—not with feet, but with words.

However, Zouken faced Kirei's cold emanating killing intent with a casual smile.

"... Oh? Did I overestimate you? I thought I'd finally managed to find a kindred spirit. It seems you still feel ashamed of your own heresy—hahaha, you're still too inexperienced. Are you ashamed in these matters, as a man would feel shame indulging in self-pleasure?"

There was no display of strength or any warning. Kirei threw two Black Keys from his left and his right in the blink of an eye, so fast that the preparatory movements could not be seen. He was going to pierce this old man's body like a piece of barbequed meat. However, Zouken remained completely unmoved; his nonchalance was no empty boast. His silhouette melted like mud moments before the two blades pierced him, and he once again became a shapeless shadow hiding in the corner. Kirei's entire body tensed. A voice of cheerful mockery sounded.

"Ahh, scary, scary. You are young, but nonetheless a hound of the Church. My mockery endangers me."

Kirei took up another Black Key and stared at the throbbing shadow in the darkness. Was that an illusion a moment ago, when he was about to pierce Matou Zouken's flesh? Or had Matou Zouken's physical body never existed? Anything was possible

when it came to this wily and devious old magus. Being surprised by such trivial matters was unbecoming of an Executor.

"You silly creature; until next time, young man. You must nurture your personality to be on equal footing with me when we next meet. Hahahaha . . ." Zouken's scent melted into the darkness and disappeared, leaving only terrifying shrieks of laughter. Kirei stood alone, holding his blades like a scarecrow.

Irritated, he threw the targetless Black Keys on the roof. He had not imagined that the old man would be a monster of no potential use whatsoever. There was no reason to keep him alive. He was certain that Matou Zouken was a nemesis he had to eliminate.

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To escape the gradually darkening night, MATOU BYAKUYA continued drowning himself in alcohol. The previous night had passed uneventfully. though he was now resentful of the fact. Mighty waves rushed ashore after calm sea weather. No danger had transpired last night, which meant dangerous happenings would be afoot tonight.

Byakuya understood clearly the truth behind the nightly events which had been threatening Fuyuki recently. He was the eldest son and inheritor of the prestigious Matou house, the final remnants of a mighty bloodline that had, in the distant past, begun a pilgrimage to seek the Holy Grail. He should have been a participant in this extraordinary, cruel war. However, he turned his back on his duty and drank day after day. Byakuya felt no

shame at his own behavior; he could say with pride that this was the correct and logical response, unlike his little brother Kariya's actions.

Byakuya could not understand why Kariya, disowned by the Matou house a long time ago, had returned to his homeland, and even gone so far as to participate in Heaven's Feel. He did not want to understand it. He could not thank his little brother enough for having changed his mind. Had he not returned, Byakuya himself would have been the one reduced to such a state and forced to participate in Heaven's Feel.

Remembering the figure, black like a vengeful spirit, which Kariya had summoned from the Summoning Circle and sealed a contract with, Byakuya numbed himself with more alcohol, to flee as far as he could from his terror. How could anyone stay sane, knowing that six similar creatures were slaughtering each other in the night while devouring human flesh and blood? The present Fuyuki city was a real demonic realm. Alcohol was the only thing that kept him living in this place in a calm state of mind.

His only child, Shinji, was sent overseas for further studies; Byakuya himself strongly opposed his stay in Fuyuki. However, he had no legitimate reason to leave the Matou mansion. Zouken had assigned him the task of acclimatizing the adopted Tousaka girl in the underground worm storage and training her to be worthy as the next Matou household head.

Yes; Byakuya had executed his task with near-perfection as the current head of the Matou house. Zouken's original plan had been to sit aside and observe this Heaven's Feel. After all, Kariya was simply a toy in the old magus's hand. Byakuya was the only one

in the Matou family who was walking along the right path. It was not merely about the number of Magic Circuits; Even if his abilities were only enough to defeat a small child, Byakuya firmly believed his was the only path that led to a future for the Matou house.

Speaking thus to himself, he continued gulping his liquor while despising his little brother. Becoming a magus of the Matou house meant becoming Zouken's puppet, controlled by the mastermind behind the scenes. Byakuya understood this, and had no sympathy for Kariya, the prodigal son who foolishly and willingly returned to be a foster bed for the Crest worms. He never had much familial love for his little brother to begin with. Kariya's talent far surpassed his older brother's, but he left the family, forcing the cursed destiny carried by generations of Matous onto Byakuya. How could he be sympathetic toward such a man?

Ahh, why was he still not sleepy? He would normally have been out cold long ago. He had not drank enough; he was not drunk enough. He wished to forget the happenings outside, to get the night done with as soon as possible—but someone took the wine glass on the table and poured its icy contents over Byakuya's head.

He fainted momentarily from the piercing cold, but it dispelled his inebriation. He was now fully conscious. A merciless impact slammed into his cheek; Byakuya curled up under the blankets on his bed, his mind broken. His cries of horror, suppressed in his throat, remained unvoiced. A wraith-like man stood there looking down at him, and his appearance sent shivers down Byakuya's

spine. He was dressed in a dirty, creased old coat, with days of stubble on his chin. He looked more like a drunkard in a pub than Byakuya, who was in his own house and dressed normally, but his eyes belied that appearance—that gaze had surpassed the realm of cruelty or mercilessness. It was filled only with the cold sadism and lethality of a wounded beast. Staring into those eyes, Byakuya surrendered all thought of uncovering the man's origins or his business here; he was a complete slave to despair. Who this man was, and how he had broken through the impressive protective boundaries of the house—none of that mattered now. This *thing* before Byakuya was undoubtedly the reincarnation of the very horror he had forgotten only with the aid of alcohol this past week.

"Where is Irisviel right now?"

He had to answer, or face death . . . but he did not understand the question! Byakuya was crushed by overwhelming despair.

"I, I, I . . ." Byakuya moaned unintelligibly. With an ice-cold gaze, the man slowly took out the weapon from his coat, gruffly pressed Byakuya's right hand to the floor with the muzzle, and squeezed the trigger. His right hand scattered into the wind with maddening thunder. Byakuya was shocked speechless; *a part of my body just disappeared.* Then a searing pain made him scream in agony.

"No, no no no I don't know I just don't know I don't know anything! Ah—! My hand! *Ahh—!*"

Emiya Kiritsugu had more experience than most in extracting information from those unwilling to provide it. Instinct honed over the years told him he would not get much of an answer with

further questioning. Matou Byakuya's soul was long ruined. For reasons unknown, Byakuya had forced himself onto a road of no return long before Kiritsugu came to visit. He was merely the final straw that broke Byakuya's back and made him crumble completely. He would hesitate at nothing to get rid of his present pain, not even betraying Zouken. At such a stage, everything he said would be the truth. Byakuya truly knew nothing about the events of the last few hours. Which meant . . . Irisviel's kidnappers were not headed for the Matou mansion. The hours spent breaking through the protective barriers, under such pressing and tense circumstances, were for nothing. Kiritsugu gritted his teeth in regret.

By elimination, only those from the Matou camp could have kidnapped Irisviel. Rider's Master did not have the reconnaissance skill to find the secret headquarters Kiritsugu had prepared, while Tousaka had just formed an alliance with them last night. Though the possibility of a new opposing force separate from the seven Masters and Servants was very low, it was not impossible. However, such wild guesses would not get him any results at this stage. Right now, he could only seek this potential enemy among the three Masters who were still protected by their Servants, and who needed Irisviel for the final stage. Almost four hours had elapsed since the raid on the underground storage; victory was slipping further away from Kiritsugu with every second he lost, and he had no time to stop and think thoroughly. Without a second look at Byakuya, sobbing with pain and terror, Kiritsugu left the Matou mansion.

Kiritsugu took another three hours to break through the protective magecraft formations of the Tousaka mansion, his next target. His methods were close to miraculous; the bounded field Tousaka Tokiomi had set up was a first-rate anti-magi security system, and was created with magi in mind in the first place. It could not be broken even under a year's assault by magecraft. Kiritsugu could overcome this bounded field quickly because he did not rely solely on magecraft, and could perceive their tools of magecraft.

But no matter how comparatively quick he was, it took long enough to make Kiritsugu anxious. He had never wasted this much time on the battlefield. Finally breaking through the protection between the inner porch and the living room, Kiritsugu entered the main lounge, but he was still tormented by a nameless anxiety. Even with his life at risk, he was not guaranteed to find Irisviel, like at the Matou mansion. Saber, who chased Irisviel one step before Kiritsugu, must also have failed. He could still feel the Circuits providing prana uninterrupted; Saber had not suffered any major injuries. However, had she been safely protected, Irisviel would have definitely activated her signal conducting system and relayed detailed information on her current location to Kiritsugu; the lack of such information spoke of Saber's wasted effort.

Kiritsugu carefully removed the seal on the window, and also removed the inner plug with a glass-cutter. he had finally arrived at the inner part of the Tousaka mansion. No lights were lit within, and all was quiet, like an empty house with no inhabitants. But the mansion was enormous; such a conclusion would be too

hasty. Tokiomi, an outstanding Master, was much more prudent than the eldest Matou son. Kiritsugu would have to be mentally prepared for a face-off against him. Of course, he would definitely use Archer, and Kiritsugu would have summon Saber here with a Command Seal. If he could, he would avoid summoning Saber against Archer, whose true fighting strength remained to be seen, but the current situation was too urgent for him to be picky about his strategies. He wanted to fight as soon as Irisviel's whereabouts are confirmed. If the one in possession of Irisviel was an unknown enemy, he would be falling into a trap if he began duelling with the Matous or Tousakas. What annoyed him most was the need to consider this possibility.

Stepping into a dark room, Kiritsugu picked up the unavoidable stench of blood. It was still fresh. Directing prana to his eyes, he activated his night vision, and the furniture and design of the room appeared in his vision with impeccable clarity. It seemed to be a living room. Two sets of teacups were on the table. A large amount of blood pooled in the middle of the luxurious carpet. Kiritsugu carefully checked the bloodstain, which had dried completely. The blood had not splattered widely, but the amount shed did not seem to come from a light wound. From experience, he concluded it could only have been a bloodstain left from a stab wound.

Kiritsugu searched through all the other rooms, just to be careful. However, his goal was no longer to have a better grasp of the situation, but to find the inhabitant here. As a medium and the initiating point of magecraft, blood was the most important ingredient in magecraft; no ordinary magus would spill it so

carelessly, much less one like Tousaka Tokiomi. Premonition turned to conviction when he reached the basement workshop unhindered. A magus would never allow others to set foot into his workshop so easily. Tokiomi was not only absent from his home, he did not even know the current state of his house.

Kiritsugu took out an eyedrop bottle from his pocket. It contained the refined body fluids extracted from a succubus, which was sensitive to the blood of men and aged objects and could be used as a chemical indicator. He tested its reaction on the bathroom sink, then on the bloodstains in the living room; both showed the same reaction. Only one man had shaved at the bathroom sink in the past few days; that same man's blood was spilled on the carpet in the living room. Tousaka Tokiomi was either dead, or had disappeared. Faced with this surprising turn of events, Kiritsugu calmed himself and assessed the situation.

There were no traces of a fight in the room. The two teacups were placed to welcome a guest. Tokiomi had definitely suffered a heavy or even lethal wound after chatting with a guest in this room; it seemed Kiritsugu was not the only one taking revenge on magi. But what was Tokiomi's Servant doing at that time? How could he look on from the sidelines and ignore his Master? But there was another possibility . . . perhaps Archer no longer needed Tokiomi as a Master, and had murdered Tokiomi. That was also a reasonable explanation. Arriving at this sombre answer, Kiritsugu felt as though a knife had twisted in his heart.

A man; Tousaka Tokiomi's friend, welcomed as a guest; a man to whom Tokiomi could even show his weaknesses. Archer's new Master had gained new Command Seals—he was someone who

had lost his Servant, and thus lost the authority of a Master, but retained his life. No further thought was necessary; only one man fit that description. If he had really obtained a new Servant and was participating once again in Heaven's Feel, kidnapping Irisviel to control the Vessel of the Grail with his own hands would be a logical and necessary move.

Kiritsugu finally understood that confrontation with Kotomine Kirei was unavoidable.

– 30:02:45

One step, and then another. Steadily, Kariya was getting closer to the Holy Grail. But the Crest worms in his body were consuming his life even faster. If he strained his ears, he could almost hear the trilling of worms slurping his flesh and blood, the sound of them scraping his bones and feasting on them. To Kariya, the pain of the Crest worms' slow, continual torture had already become a part of himself, alongside his breath and heartbeat. His consciousness was constantly cloudy and dim, and if he lost his focus he would be only vaguely aware of the passage of time. Kariya swore never to forgive him as a person. Like water seeping out of a crevice, the thought eroded his heart bit by bit.

How many more times can I fight? How many more days will I live? If Kariya was trying to gain the Holy Grail and secure Sakura's salvation with his own hands, he could only wait for a miracle; was that not so? In that case, should he pray? He was now in front of the towering gable roof, at that cross with its detached gaze, the worms creeping toward the ground; should he kneel down and pray earnestly?

"Stop kidding . . . me . . . ugh!"

He felt a flood of humiliating timidity. Kariya rebuked himself. He did not come to the church at a time like this to seek imaginary help. On the contrary, Kariya sought the blood of his sworn enemy this evening. If Kotomine Kirei could be trusted, Tousaka Tokiomi was awaiting Kariya's visit at the chapel right at this moment. He was not here for repentance or worship—Kariya now

stood at the altar to conclude a vendetta. Kotomine Kirei had prepared an unlikely rematch for his previous duel with Tokiomi, which he had lost. Tonight would be his last chance to get back at that loathsome magus; he could not be careless.

The pain of his flesh, conflict, despair—all were burned to ashes by the flames of hatred that flared in his heart. Memories of the previous battle—in which he had not returned a single attack—further fanned the fury within Kariya. His mind could only see the instant of destruction—of the man who had snatched Aoi away from him and abandoned Sakura—at his hands. With that as his only thought, the distance to the Holy Grail, and the terror of being defeated—all were forgotten. He was now an automatic, hate-driven machine, and his heart was liberated from all suffering. His mouth curved into a smile. He no longer feared turning Berserker loose. He would seize Tokiomi's heart and bathe in the gushing blood. If he could achieve that, there was nothing he could not afford to lose—such was the state he had been reduced to.

His shoulders shook like a beast drawing a deep breath. Arrived at the front gate of the church with killing intent seeping from his entire body, Kariya slowly pushed the doors open.

A candlelight glimmered dimly in the middle of the chapel. The still air was peaceful, seeminly frozen. Kariya felt a slight sense of unease, like one stepping in a graveyard. Nevertheless, the instant he saw the back of a familiar head in the frontmost pew, anger overwhelmed him.

"Tousaka . . . Tokiomi!" It was a shout brimming with killing intent, but there was no reply. Complete disregard was typical of his proud attitude. Kariya strode in and closed his distance with Tokiomi.

"You want to kill me, Tokiomi? You're too naïve. Until I have my revenge on you, I will . . ."

His defenseless back exposed to Kariya, Tokiomi did not respond. Despite the anger egging him on, Kariya slowed with distrust and caution. He wondered if it was a decoy puppet put there to trick him. However, from up close, he could see the wide shoulders, the carefully trimmed, curly, and glossy hair, and even the shape of his slightly visible ears—without a doubt, it was Tousaka. Kariya would not be mistaken about the figure of his sworn enemy, which was branded into his eyes.

Now close enough to reach out and touch Tokiomi with his hands, Kariya stopped. With hatred and an odd unease and confusion, he gazed at Tokiomi's back; Tokiomi still had not budged an inch.

"Tousaka—" He stretched out his hand. The day before, defensive fire had stopped all his attacks. Recalling the scorching heat, he instinctively drew his hand back. The impulse to grab Tokiomi's neck, just a few centimeters away, and break it, was irresistible. Finally, the shivering fingertip reached the front of the neck banded with a stylish tie.

With just a light touch, the corpse, which had been leaning against the seat, lost its balance. Like a puppet with its strings cut, like building blocks tumbling, Tousaka Tokiomi's ice-cold body collapsed into Kariya's arms.

Confusion and shock hit Matou Kariya like a hammer blow to his head. The blank face was unmistakable. Tokiomi was dead. The scornful, haughty derision, the intimately cold-hearted words of mockery . . . Kariya's memories of Tousaka Tokiomi flooded his thoughts and overwhelmed him. The sentiment, motivation, and urge swirling within Kariya all blew at once.

"Wh—wh—why . . .?"

Standing with the silent corpse in his hands, dumbstruck, Kariya was stunned at the size of the gaping hole in it. His face crumbled unrecognizably. At that moment, for the first time, he realized that he had not considered, much less foreseen losing his driving factor—his bitter enemy, Tousaka Tokiomi; but the realization came too late. Kariya could not even recall why he had been fighting Tokiomi, or what had he wished in participating in the war of the Holy Grail. Just then—

". . . Kari . . . ya?"

—At that moment, a familiar, lovely voice called out to him from behind. Kariya had not noticed anything up to that point. Turning back in a stupor, he could not understand why Aoi Tousaka was still standing there. If his brain had been functioning properly, he probably would have wondered why he was being called by Aoi of all people, and why she had visited this place when there was no reason at all for her to do so. He would likely have thought about the one person who could have positioned Tokiomi's body at the chapel beforehand—it had to be a human—and guessed the identity of Tokiomi's killer without difficulty.

"A . . . u . . ." At the height of his confusion, Kariya could not even mouth words legibly; he fell to moaning uselessly. The

instant he staggered back, the corpse he had been carrying in his arms fell onto the chapel floor like a sack. For a long time, Aoi stared at the figure that had once been her husband, without twitching a muscle.

"Aoi . . . I . . ."

Without a sound, Aoi slowly approached Tokiomi's body. Kariya, feeling overpowered, retreated further, but was soon stopped by an obstacle. The chapel altar stood rigid, as though passing judgment on him. Bending her knees to the floor, Aoi lifted Tokiomi's face. With no place to hide, Kariya could only watch her. He could not understand why Aoi did such a thing—no, he did not wish to understand why she did not spare so much as a glance at him, her childhood friend, but fixed her eyes on Tokiomi's body instead. He did not wish to understand the meaning of those tears falling down her face. Kariya obstinately rejected comprehension, and could not utter a single word. If his memory still served, he was supposed never to make this person, whom he loved above all else, cry again; he was to fight for her even at the cost of his life. Who was this woman sobbing in front of him right now, who was she? He could not accept the answer without falling apart.

She did not look at Kariya. Tears continued to poured from her eyes, over her husband's body. She, the tragic heroine, was his center, around whom his world revolved; Kariya was an existence devoid of all meaning, like trash on the stage or a stain in the background. He was terrified by the erasure of his very existence. He felt an impulse to scream and catch her attention, but not a sound came from his dry throat. Nevertheless, Aoi finally lifted

her head and looked Kariya straight in the eye—and then he finally understood: ignorance was a greater compassion. Disappearing from the world at that instant would have brought far greater relief.

"... So the Matous practically have the Holy Grail now, right? Are you happy now, Kariya?" The voice was familiar, but the tone was not; he could not remember his gentle and kind childhood friend ever hating or cursing anyone.

"I—but, I—"

Why must he be blamed? Tokiomi Tousaka was the cause of all the evil. Everything was supposed to turn out well without him around. Why had he died in such a place in the first place? Kariya should have been the one asking questions instead.

"Why ...?"

Without giving Kariya time to reply, she asked him in return instead. "The Matous are still not satisfied even after snatching Sakura away from me? You, of all people, killed this man in front of my own eyes ... Why? Do you really hate us so much?"

I don't know, I don't know. Her face was just like Aoi's; her voice was just like Aoi's; but why was this woman directing such seething enmity and cold hatred toward him? Kariya was supposed to have saved Aoi; he was supposed to have secured a future for her beloved daughter; why was he being blamed? Who on earth was this woman?

"That guy—it's his fault—" Pointing at Tokiomi's corpse with a shaky hand, Kariya tried to correct Aoi loudly. "If that man would just disappear—no misfortune would befall anyone. Aoi, Sakura—I thought you'd be ... happy—"

"Cease your nonsense!" With a demonic expression, the woman howled. "You—what would you know, as one who has never loved anyone before!"

"Ah—"

—He collapsed with a decisive snap.

"I . . ."

I have loved . . . someone warm and gentle; someone whom I wished to make happy, above all else. For her sake, I would give my life. For these feelings, I have endured, endured *to this day all the pain and hardship, denied of everything without a chance to justify myself, for her sake I am willing to die for*—go to hell!—*You lie! You lie!* You lie! *The one I love most is, without a doubt, most certainly—! I—*

"For me . . . the person . . . I love . . ." Scraping murmurs from his throat, Kariya's fists tightened. He would deny those words that denied him; he would silence that mouth for eternity. He would—tightly squeeze the throat that tormented him. Its mouth quivered, gasping for oxygen like a grounded fish, and it seemed to him that it quivered words of further abuse, and his fury rose in spurts. *If I fail to seal this voice, all is over; everything to this day would be meaningless. I cannot allow that at any cost!*

Matou Kariya's madness was his last stronghold of salvation, but even this lowest rung was denied him—the face, rapidly turning deathly pale from suffocation, resembled his beloved, whom he cherished—by God! He was strangling the very woman!

". . . Ah." As both hands loosened, a sound slipped from Aoi's mouth, and she collapsed onto the ground with a thud; she had

fainted, not budging an inch. Lacking even judgment to differentiate the living from the dead, Kariya thought her dead, dead, stone cold dead, just like Tokiomi.

"Ah, ah . . ." He gazed at the hands which had choked the life from Aoi, someone more important than anything else, one who was his life. The life-stealing fingers stiffened, like the fingers of another, but he could deceive himself no longer—the fingers were *his*. A realization struck him—those squirming, shaking fingers looked *just* like the Crest worms creeping about Sakura's skin.

Letting out an unearthly scream, he clawed at his broken face, he tore his dried-up hair; he could not tell if he was shrieking or wailing now. As the last bit of sense ebbed away, leaving only the debris of animalistic instinct, Kariya fled desperately, stumbling, away from the chapel. He had lost everything, and the starless night outside the church now welcomed him into vast, pitch-black nothingness.

Within Fuyuki Church, some secrets were known only to the priest. The seemingly solid wall that separated the chapel and the priest's room in the back in reality only functioned as a partition. It was built with the consideration that all writings in the chapel would go through the priest's room. As Kotomine Kirei settled into a chair in the priest's room, he could hear the development of the tragedy outside in detail. Beside him, the golden Servant watched him immersed in his own thoughts, and asked.

"A foolish, worthless play. Oh well, not too bad for your first manuscript. How was it, Kirei? What are your views?"

Silently gazing into space, Kirei gulped wine from a glass. It was a mysterious sensation. The plot was just as he imagined and expected—it was performed and recreated by human beings of flesh and blood, human beings furnished with souls. There was no surprise at all—both Matou Kariya and Tousaka Aoi had accepted the roles Kirei conveyed to them. At the appointed time, they had visited the church and encountered each other with perfect timing. He had not expected Tokiomi's body—which was just a stage prop—to have the exact effect he desired. He had rectified the fatal wounds and the stiffened body; no one should have been able to perceive that he had been dead for more than half a day. Though it betrayed none of his expectations—even if he expected no surprises—as he watched to the end, he felt a peculiar excitement. To put a name to it, one might call it a sense of novelty.

That tragic scene was not a fantasy performed by actors. It was true that Kirei had guided the scene, but the baring of innermost feelings, the clashing of fellow humans against each other, the radiance of souls scattering sparks of existence—these were, without doubt, all authentic. Struggling to compose an answer Gilgamesh's question, Kirei tasted the fragrance of the wine in his mouth again. Indeed, if it was surprise he sought, he would be more likely to find it in this wine.

"... Why, I drank this before, and yet ... I did not notice how profound its flavor was."

The King of Heroes smiled at Kirei, who continued gazing at his wine glass with a straight face. "The taste of a wine is disguised in unexpected forms, and depends on the dish that

accompanies it. You are starting to understand the meaning of the phrase, 'to broaden one's view'."

Not knowing the best way to respond to the rapturous Gilgamesh, Kirei put down his empty glass and stood up. Occupied with thoughts of the things he was to attend to later, he felt he could not afford to keep relaxing. Aoi, lying on the chapel floor, would require treatment. He also had to rendezvous with the fleeing Kariya for his next course of action. Nevertheless, before le left the room, Kirei took one more look at the empty glass. He noticed his reluctance to part with the wine which he had finally finished.

Earnestly, he thought—*if I could taste such flavor from this wine, I would love to savor it again.*

Act 15

– 25:48:06

The sky was brightening by the time Waver Velvet returned to the MacKenzie house in Miyama. He had been walking for hours along the footpath, and would not have made it back had he not encountered a taxi on the way—an opportune stroke of luck in such a remote location—but he knew not if he should be thankful or angry. Fortune should have graced them when Rider and Waver were in their fiercest moment of battle instead.

As he got out of the taxi, Waver heard someone call out. "—Hey, Waver. Come, come here."

He lifted his head. Old man Glen, patriarch of the family, whom Waver had assumed was sound asleep, was sitting on the second-storey rooftop, and was waving at Waver, who was at the door.

"Grandpa? You . . . what are you doing?"

"All right, all right. Come on up. I've got something to say to you."

"Something to say to me? Then . . . why are you on the roof?"

"You won't find a view like this anywhere else. There's no better place than this to be bathed in the light of the early dawn." This kind of strange behavior was enough to make people wonder if he was going senile. Waver did not feel like humoring the old man. He had returned with a tired, shuffling gait, having suffered the chilly night air; all he wanted was to tuck into bed as soon as possible and rest his exhausted body.

"Grandpa . . . can it wait till morning?"

"Don't say that." Though his tone was placid, old man Glen was adamant.

"Kid, you better get up there. the old guy really wants to say something to you." A rough voice, audible only to Waver, sounded above his shoulder. Rider had finally promised to conserve his prana and remained in spiritual form on his return journey after his fight with Saber. "I'll keep an eye on the surroundings. Don't worry."

"It's not about that . . ." Waver wanted to rebuke, but immediately hushed himself—to Glen, he would be muttering to himself oddly. "No one cares about what I think . . ." He was to provide company for this useless old man at this stage of the War; Waver felt resentful. Arguing would only drag it longer, and he could not respond to questioning about his activities last night. He headed for the roof.

The MacKenzie house differed from the surrounding houses in one way: it had an attic and a skylight in the roof. It was easy to climb up to the roof through the skylight using the ladder on the second-story stairway. It had not been made that way by accident; rather, the house had been been designed to enable easy access to

the rooftop. It was easy to get to the roof, but now he had to endure the frosty winter dawn; Waver shivered. With absolutely nothing around to break the northern wind, the chill at this height was incomparable to what it was on the ground.

"Sit. Here, I made some coffee. It will heat you up." Old man Glen said loudly as he poured the steaming liquid out of the thermal flask and into the mug. He was wearing a down coat and had a few blankets wrapped around him. Waver could not fathom reasons for the old man to do this.

"Grandpa . . . how long have you been sitting here?"

"I woke up as the sky was getting bright, and discovered you were still not back. You can see the spring constellations at this time of the year. So I wanted to watch the sky while awaiting my grandson's return . . ." Waver did not reply to the drunken, almost senile words, but drank his coffee nonchalantly. Glen had thought of getting up just to look at constellations; were all old men so leisurely?

"What's wrong, Waver? Didn't you like this spot a lot when you were young? You watched the stars with me many times. Do you still remember that?"

"Mm . . . I think so."

Waver gazed out at the scene below him as he perfunctorily brushed off these past events that he had no memories of. The entirety of Fuyuki city, from Miyama to the sea, could be seen from the rooftop, since the house was built on the side of the hill. The air was fresh and crisp, and the dawn dyed the sea with a shade of pearly pink. He could even perceive the shadow of sails waving away to distant lands.

"How is it? Isn't this a nice view?"

It was the entire view of the battlefield for Waver. He had no leisure in his heart to appreciate such beauty.

"I first set foot on this land because of a business trip. Martha asked for two things when I discussed the decision to leave our bones on the land of Fuyuki with her. One was that the house was to be built on the hill of Miyama, and the other was that there had to be a skylight that allowed us to go on the roof . . . But Chris still could not forget Toronto. He simply refused to be brought up like a Japanese." Glen's gaze, immersed in memory, looked toward the other side of the ocean, the homeland where his departed son resided.

". . . Do you really like Japan that much?"

"You could say that. But it would be regrettable if I fought with my son and separated from him for that reason alone . . ." The old man let out a sigh as he recalled those years of loneliness. "I've always dreamed of sitting on the roof and watching the stars with my grandson just like this, though I expect it will never happen."

"—Huh?" The obvious incongruity in that reminiscence, accompanied by a bitter smile, made Waver pause. As if mocking him, old man Glen silently shook his head and said. "My real grandson never came to the roof with me. Martha is also afraid of heights. I'd always been alone when I watched the stars . . ."

What injured Waver more than the awkwardness and the sense of crisis was the feeling of humiliation. "Say, Waver, you aren't our grandson, right?" The subliminal hint had been removed—moreover, by a gentle old man with no training in magecraft.

"I—"

"Mmm, who are you? It doesn't matter. It's incredible that Martha and I actually believed you were our grandson. But even after living for so long, I've found that some incredible things in this world remain incredible no matter how hard you think about them … Your usual behavior was gentler than our grandson's, anyway."

"… Aren't you angry?" Waver asked in a small voice. Old man Glen said with a complex but calm expression.

"As for that … of course I'm angry. But Martha smiles all the time now; that used to be impossible. I should thank you for that. Also, you don't seem to harbor any ill intent. Straightforward youths like you and that man Alex are so hard to find these days. As to why you deceived us … I couldn't understand it even if I wanted to."

Waver came to the conclusion that this old man was completely defenseless and extremely dense. Even the lab rats in the Clock Tower were smarter than him. Why did he not hate Waver? Why did he not blame Waver? For Waver, who knew only the small world of the Mage's Association, the old man's leniency was something he could not comprehend.

"Perhaps I can ask you to stay only because I know nothing about you … If possible, I hope we can keep this relationship for a while longer. Martha probably did not feel anything unusual; it wouldn't matter if it was a dream. The times we spent with our kind grandson have been our hard-sought treasure."

Waver could not bring himself to look at the old man. He lowered his eyes and looked at his hands, hands that would one

day create great mysteries. He had such talent—even if others refuted him, at the very least he could firmly believe in that possibility within himself. But reality disagreed. He could not even execute a hypnotic hint well; a hypnotic hint, the most basic of arts! It was not a matter of luck, or an accident. His magecraft did not work even against a kind old man who begged him to deceive them a while longer.

Had he been *that* man, he could have achieved his goal, laughing with a goblet in his hand. Not only had Waver Velvet failed to achieve such a result, he was now indebted to another's kindness. he felt a sense of absurdity on top of regret—yes, he was only a clown. Staring into the empty sky, Waver became oblivious to his surroundings and sank into contemplation. Now he fully understood the mindsets of those in the Clock Tower who had laughed at him; Waver would laugh at his own stupidity with them if he could, but Glen and Martha MacKenzie were not expecting a comedy. They were making a sincere request to Waver in their own way. It was the first time he was not the subject of ridicule.

"... I'm sorry, I can't promise you that. I can't even promise I can return here safely next time."

"So you and Alex are doing something that endangers your lives?"

"Yes." Saber's Noble Phantasm and its cold light flashed before his eyes. That had happened half a day ago. Waver would not forget the abyss of death he saw any time soon. Old man Glen was silent in thought for a while, then he gave a heavy nod.

"I don't know how important that thing is to you . . . but I do hope you will hear me out. You'll realize that there's nothing more important than life itself when you look back after living most of it."

This logic was contrary to the reason for which Waver gambled his youth. The so-called way of magecraft could only begin once the practitioner was prepared to die—the ultimate state could only be achieved by burning away one's life. That was the direction he had labored in to this day. But if one were to search for a way of existence befitting oneself, perhaps this peaceful old man's words would prove to be the truth.

With a sense of loss that left him speechless, Waver stared at the dawn, unaware that he was greeting the final day of the fourth War of the Holy Grail.

– 17:21:41

People remembered that day in Fuyuki city to be one of abnormal weather conditions. Unbelievably, the daily north wind suddenly ceased, and intense, midsummer-like sunlight scorched the seemingly stagnant air, creating an unseasonable heat haze everywhere. Bafflingly high temperatures and humidity, inexplicable even to weather forecasters, occurred over a very limited region, centred at Fuyuki city, further fueling the premonitions first felt by the clueless townspeople when strange things had first begun to happen.

The guerrilla incidents happening one after another in the city; the bizarre, appalling murderers; the disappearance of infants—not a single clue could be found. There was no sign of the night curfew being lifted, and worse still, there had been that incident involving the waste processing plant on the Mion River the day before yesterday. These bizarre incidents grated the nerves of the exhausted citizens, but they could not help but feel that this peculiar weather was an omen of more calamities yet to come.

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Sitting wide awake in the shade of a tree, Emiya Kiritsugu watched the angle of his shadow change slowly with the blazing sunlight. More than forty hours had elapsed since he last slept, but his senses were still tense, never desiring rest. His situation was dangerous; he had to time his breaks well and maintain a

condition that allowed him to deal with things perfectly in crucial times—this was his experience as a professional fighter. The early-warning boundary field was already in place at key positions, ready to wake him on the approach of any unknown person. If he was in standby mode now, he could enter REM sleep within seconds, possibly dealing with his accumulated fatigue as well.

However, at this moment, Kiritsugu did not even spare a thought about such established caution. The cutting off of feelings and maintenance of his condition was one of his mechanisms, but when under duress, he was able to surpass his limits and drive himself past limits—this was another mechanism. The premonition of score-settling he felt under his skin allowed him to do this.

Right now, Kiritsugu was observing the side of the pond in the back of Ryuudouji Temple, situated along the mountainside of Mount Enzou, east of Miyama town. After confirming Tokiomi's fallout and Kotomine Kirei's comeback at the Tousaka residence yesterday night, Kiritsugu had launched an assault on the Shinto church immediately, but the headquarters was already empty. There were signs of humans having been there about an hour before, so it could have been a narrow miss. The delays incurred by the invasions of the Matou and Tousaka residences had cost him precious time. At that point, Kiritsugu had completely abandoned his search for Irisviel. He had concluded that being emotionally attached, would only cause him to fall deeper into the enemy's trap. To have any chance of winning, he had be a Master seeking the Holy Grail, not a husband seeking his wife.

In relinquishing the Holy Grail vessel—the trump card of the Einsberns—Kiritsugu now had to participate in the Holy Grail war on the same terms as the outsider Masters. Luring the enemy into making mistakes while utilizing his superior advantage and overlooking defense was no longer viable; he now had to seek ambush opportunities to outsmart his leading rivals. The strategy of jumping ahead of his opponents was effective because he could henceforth fortify his position—which was to look beyond the final stage of the battle—and set his traps in preparation.

To an outsider, the War of the Holy Grail was mending its image as a battle royale, but as the war progressed, it began to show signs of becoming a battle to occupy each other's camps. The ultimate goal was to hold the ceremony for the descent of the Holy Grail; but securing a proper place for the altar was an unavoidable part of the victor's plans. In Fuyuki, there were only four locations with enough suitable prana to summon the Holy Grail. The first was Mount Enzou, which held the natural cavern, the Dragon's Hole. There, the Greater Holy Grail—with Justicia as its foundation—was located. It was a secret altar known only to the Three Families of the Origin, their favorite ever since it was prepared 180 years ago.

The Tousaka family, which provided the grounds, had the right to use the best spiritual leyline as their base. However, the prana overflowing from Mount Enzou was too powerful and dangerous to be used as a residence to bring up the next generation of magi. Hence, they set up their stronghold at the next best spiritual land —the current Tousaka residence. Though inferior to the Greater

Holy Grail, it had sufficient spiritual power to summon the Holy Grail.

The Makiris were assigned to a ground when they migrated here, but they realized the spiritual aura of the ground was not suitable for the family's element, and shifted the Matou residence. The original spiritual leyline was protected by the Holy Church, which intervened later; today, it is on the hill which Fuyuki Church was built on—that was the third spiritual leyline. Far away from Mount Enzou, it was located at the outskirts of Shinto, the opposite side of the river—however, it was hardly inferior to the second best spiritual land.

The fourth spiritual leyline did not exist originally. Spiritual processing by the other three spiritual leylines induced an anomaly in the flow of mana, which formed a pool after about a hundred years—a secondary spiritual land. Through subsequent investigations, it was confirmed to have sufficient prana to carry out the ceremony, and during the third Holy Grail War, it was marked as a candidate site. Presently, it was located at the centre of the developing residential area of Shinto. Nevertheless, there was a problem—a municipal hall was recently built on that spot.

Even if Kotomine Kirei had taken possession of the vessel of the Holy Grail, he would have to perform the ceremony at one of these four key spiritual lands. Kiritsugu could set up traps and ambush him at those locations, and would stand a high chance of turning the tables. With Fuyuki Church left unoccupied, Kiritsugu unexpectedly found himself in a good position, able to secure the Tousaka residence and the Fuyuki Church—the second- and third-best spiritual leylines; he had found the silver lining in this

dark cloud. Using them to his fullest advantage, he booby-trapped the two buildings, planting explosives until morning. Since noon, he had been setting up a new entrenchment at Ryuudouji Temple, and was now on the lookout.

Kiritsugu predicted that Kirei, who had vanished from Fuyuki church, would probably choose Mount Enzou as the ceremonial place. There was the possibility that his intention was to seclude himself from society, but for him to relinquish the spiritual leyline he had already secured could only mean that he wished to perform the ceremony at the best spiritual land. Having obliterated Tokiomi Tousaka, his residence would also be at Kirei's disposal—but he had left that place readily, so the only place left was the Greater Holy Grail at Mount Enzou.

There was the slight, ever-present possibility that these were just a bluff to mislead Kiritsugu, and that Kirei would return to Fuyuki church or the Tousaka residence. Kiritsugu laid those traps for that very reason. If the vessel of the Holy Grail was still unharmed after that, victory would easily be his—as for Irisviel's life, Kiritsugu had already accepted its loss on philosophy. To increase his chances at outwitting Kirei, he could not disregard the Fuyuki municipal hall, the fourth spiritual leyline; Kiritsugu settled for surveillance via a familiar there. It had been left that way, undefended by spells. Compared to the other three ceremonial sites, which were hard to attack and easy to defend, the municipal hall was not a strategic position at all for magi battles.

Hypothetically speaking, if Kotomine Kirei were to appear at the municipal hall, Kiritsugu would carry out a full frontal assault. It was of course the worst development, but the risk of such a

thing happening was also the lowest. Mount Enzou was still at the top of his priority list. If Maiya was still unharmed, she would be able to secure the municipal hall . . . But lamenting that was futile. He could rely only on himself. Kiritsugu suddenly recalled the times after he had lost Natalia. His experiences of independent action out of an alliance were surprisingly few. Was it because Kiritsugu he was always the one standing in the end? He felt a distant connection between his life and solitude. Perhaps it was a life much more cruel than being alone; there was always someone beside him. The one making excuses all this while for causing their deaths was, again, Kiritsugu. Since he met them, he had been destined to part with Maiya and Irisviel. Sure enough, he was now left on his own, trying to enter the final stage of the battle. Beginning and ending this way—it had to be Emiya Kiritsugu's fate. Such absurdity was unforgivable for one like him, who had lost so many.

—The boundary field at the temple gates sensed the presence of something approaching. Kiritsugu cut off his disorganized emotions, gripped the Calico submachine gun in his hands, and stealthily examined the grounds. But caution was unnecessary; he recognized the prana signature which approached him. There was someone—his strongest reinforcement—who had not joined his side as an ally yet; Kiritsugu snickered in surprise at the sudden thought. She was still alive. Even if she did join him, it was hard to say if she would be an ally.

Though hidden, a Servant could not be mistaken about her own Master's whereabouts. Saber was not lost; she had come all the way to the treetop where Kiritsugu hid himself, stopping at

talking distance, but outside the range of blows—a delicate distance indeed. A distance too far for intimate words to be exchanged between them; that was also the distance separating the hearts of this Master and his Servant. The slender suited figure was as imposing as ever, but the exhaustion in her face could not be concealed. Physical fatigue was nothing to a Heroic Spirit, but the excessive exhaustion of worry was another matter. The commanding glint her eyes held when she waited on Irisviel was losing its force.

"I had been searching the streets for Irisviel since last night, but have no discoveries to report . . . I'm very sorry."

He had not thought about the Servant, and had left behind; Kiritsugu had no interest in how much time she had wasted in a night. Hearing about her idle actions which were to his expectations, he could not think of a reply. Even now, Saber's aim was still to rescue Irisviel. From midnight until morning, while Kiritsugu was preparing the deathtraps for Kotomine Kirei, this Servant had probably sought Irisviel recklessly, riding around the city looking for her without a clue. Was that a knight's willpower? Naïve, honest loyalty to someone she had once served? . . . Her actions suggested no strategic planning whatsoever. But at the same time, it was also stinging criticism of Kiritsugu, who had resigned himself to the death of his wife, and changed his strategies accordingly.

Needless to say, she did not come all the way to mock him; Saber was just stopping by at Ryuudouji temple as part of her search for Irisviel, and had sensed the presence of her Master. But seeing her again on the second day, and having once again to face

the difference between their principles and actions, he ascertained ever more perceptively the conflict of their principles.

At the cold look from Kiritsugu from the dim shadows of the tree, the dry premonition Saber felt within her heart returned. Perhaps she would not never get the chance to exchange a word with her own Master on respectable terms until the end of the War.

"... Well then, I will resume the search for Irisviel. If anything happens, summon me with the Command Seals like you did last time." With that, Saber returned to the temple grounds, unstopped by and without further word from Kiritsugu. His actions were most appropriate for the Holy Grail War—Even Saber herself understood that. She could leave this place to him without doubt. If the Servant was needed, the Command Seals could transcend space and summon her to his side; she had already experienced that last night, and confirmed it.

Descending the flight of stone steps leading from the temple gate, Saber squinted in the unpleasant blaze of the sun. There were no enemies to be found, and she did know know where Irisviel was ... all that was left was her definite intuition, which told her that she could not afford to waste a single moment. Only her tingling impatience spurred her on now.

– 16:05:37

The scorching summer heat, unusually hot for the season, did not affect Kotomine Kirei. The ice-cold humid air sank into the darkness and was completely isolated from the bustling world outside. His location was ideal; it would allow him to wait for nightfall before making his move. Kotomine Kirei's temporary hiding place was the blood-covered underground cavern that Uryuu Ryuunosuke and Caster had once occupied as their headquarters, the water tank deep within the Fuyuki City sewage system. Moreover, this was the fated place where the Assassins he summoned had been utterly humiliated. It was truly ironic that such a memory had made Kotomine Kirei choose this hiding place. Caster, who had become the target of all the other Masters at Risei's command, had managed to stay alive here after the chaotic battle in the Einsbern Forest; that was the best testimony to its secrecy. Rider and his Master were the only ones who had found and entered this place, but they no longer had any reason to pay attention to Caster's workshop now.

His safety ensured, Kirei reviewed the current situation. On top of having eliminated Tousaka Tokiomi, befriended Matou Kariya, and secured the Vessel of the Grail, he had also managed to keep Saber and Rider in a stalemate while his own whereabouts were unknown to all—this was achieved within a day after his decision to return to Heaven's Feel. Although luck did play a part, nothing in the world was meant to be perfect. Kirei himself was surprised at the ease with which he changed the chaotic and

senseless situation of the war. He had usurped and taken the advantage Tousaka Tokiomi possessed at the beginning of the war. Archer, who had materialized into this world as the most powerful Servant in this Heaven's Feel, was in Kirei's hands. Berserker, a formidable enemy due to his innate differences from Archer, had also become Kirei's puppet, alongside his Master. Nothing else could threaten Kotomine Kirei.

The outcome of Rider's and Saber's tussle did not matter. The battle among Servants would end as soon as the victor was eliminated by Archer's ultimate Noble Phantasm. On the off-chance that both the King of Knights and the King of Conquerors managed to survive—or worse, if they came to an agreement and joined forces against him—there was still the powerful Berserker to stop them. Though Matou Kariya was almost in ruins after the incident with Aoi, Berserker would attack Saber without his Master's command.

Preparing three or four battle plans for the potentially unpredictable fight with Rider would be good enough for Kirei, but Archer did not agree to it; the battle belonged not to Kirei, but to the King of Heroes. Kirei was to respect the wish of the warriors if they desired a face-to-face rivalry. This was the biggest difference between Kirei and the other magi, who merely used Servants as tools—he was opposed to using even a single Command Seal on Archer; attempting to harness such a huge ego to his will would only achieve the opposite result. The best way was not to control this Servant as a pawn, but to use him as though he were an environmental condition, like the weather or the direction of the wind. A sailor could not control the wind, but

he could dexterously control his boat using the sail. This was Kirei's reasoning.

Archer had left for the moment; he did not like being cooped up in the underground base. Kirei understood that Archer would rush back when necessary, and did not feel uneasy in the least. The King of Heroes was not a familiar, but an accomplice with mutual interests. In other words, there were more efficient ways to use the Command Seals he had taken from Risei. Even if Kirei possessed no Magic Crests, there were many ways for him to perform magecraft, at the right price. His chances of victory were high even against an expert magus.

The final battle between Servants tonight will decide the Holy Grail's final destination. As an onlooker, all he had to do was wait for the right opportunity. As a Master, his primary concern was a battle of strategies beyond that of Servants—in that battle would be Kirei's greatest enemy, Emiya Kiritsugu. He would be the only one capable of eliminating his the advantage at this stage.

In his heart, Kirei had always looked forward to the duel with Kiritsugu. However, the opponent was a thorough assassin; such an encounter would never come about. He would have to consider the battle situation frequently and ensure his advantage, to create a scenario in which he could fight Emiya Kiritsugu face to face. If Kiritsugu had the upper hand, Kirei would be finished without ever seeing his opponent's face. All would have been for naught then.

Kirei was sure that Emiya Kiritsugu could not have known of the water tank; Uryuu Ryuunosuke would have been eliminated even sooner otherwise. He would not suffer a sudden attack as

long as he remained hidden here. All he had to do now was keep his opponent worrying and running around blindly. Kirei would be the one to decide the location of the duel. Kiritsugu operated strictly according to logic, and Kirei would predict his moves and turn that logic on him, misleading him until he had no choice but to appear before Kirei—that goal was already finalized. All that was left was to wait for nightfall.

Kirei turned his eyes to a corner of the darkness on hearing a painful moan. The Einsbern homunculus, kidnapped by Berserker on his suggestion, was lying there face-up. her posture was unnatural; a simple Magic Circle had been drawn around her to allow the surrounding prana to flow in. Though this location was not above a leyline, there was still leftover prana gathered here from when Caster had greedily devoured the souls of his sacrifices. Regardless of her feelings on the matter, it was enough to stabilize her condition. Of course, it would be easy if he were to simply cut open her abdomen now and take the Vessel of the Grail, but Kirei wished to speak with her.

"Can you hear me, woman?"

The homunculus opened her eyes, breathing faintly. Her empty gaze was unfocused, and her eyesight had diminished, but she still recognized the voice of her nemesis.

"Kotomine . . . Kirei. So you are the one . . ."

"The victor of the Heaven's Feel is about to be decided. Perhaps I will be the one to complete the ancient wish of your Einsbern house." He was not confident enough to declare absolute victory, but such a conclusion was a conservative estimate. "You still adopt such an uncooperative attitude. Are you so displeased with me?"

"Naturally. I will entrust the Holy Grail to only one person, and that would never be you, Executor." Although she found it difficult even to speak, the hatred and power in her voice made Kirei furrow his brows.

"I don't understand. You're nothing but a doll for carrying the Holy Grail. Your only concern should be the the completion of the ceremony rather than who wins the war. Why are you so bent on certain Masters in your current condition?"

"Yes, how could you possibly understand? . . . You're the kind of person who does not even have a wish to bestow upon the Holy Grail." The loathing mockery further baffled Kirei—was this woman really just a homunculus? How did a homunculus, not even possessing a soul, come to have such emotions? "Kotomine Kirei. . . you're an empty man who doesn't even understand the meaning of battle. You'll never win against that man . . . Be prepared! My knight, my husband will surely destroy you . . ."

". . . Why are you talking about me?"

What baffled Kirei was the content of her words. How could this homunculus look into his heart with such accuracy? Tokiomi could not do that, nor could his own father or wife.

"Hah, scared? Fine, I'll tell you . . . Emiya Kiritsugu has seen through you. He's alarmed by you, and regards you as the greatest enemy . . . Kiritsugu will fall upon you in a way more cruel and merciless than anyone else. Prepare yourself!"

So that was why—Kirei nodded with satisfaction. If it was him—if one who could understand Kirei truly existed—he must be the same kind of person as Kirei. Emiya Kiritsugu had not let him down. Though the two of them had never met, he had

nevertheless made the most appropriate evaluation of Kotomine Kirei.

"Thank you, woman. That is a blessing for me. The man Emiya Kiritsugu is truly as I had imagined."

However, a bout of mocking laughter answered Kirei.

"... Foolish man! You're saying you understand Emiya Kiritsugu? ... Hmph, don't make me laugh. You aren't even up to his heel in worth."

"—What did you say?" The sudden sound made his entire body shiver. He could not forget that sentence.

"True ... Emiya Kiritsugu can see through you, but you'll never see through him ... Kotomine Kirei, you don't have any of the things he has in his soul."

Kirei grasped her slender neck before further mockery could come from her throat. The rage and confusion swirling in Kirei's heart right then was incomparable to what he had felt in the Einsbern forest.

"... I admit it. True, I'm an empty man. I have nothing." His roaring was initially calm, though traces of agitation surfaced later. "But what's the difference between Kiritsugu and me? Between me and that man who only devoted himself to senseless war, a man with nothing to gain from it, who only repeated his slaughter?! He was so far from common sense and he got absolutely nothing. What is he, if not a lost soul?!"

Kirei rebuked her desperately and hoarsely. The inquiry was the angry roar of an anguished soul that could not obtain the answer it sought, even after experiencing trials of every imaginable kind.

"Homunculus, answer me if you can. Why does Emiya Kiritsugu seek the Holy Grail? What is the wish he has bestowed upon the all-powerful wish-granting vessel?!" Provocatively, Kirei loosened his hands from around the homunculus's neck, permitting her to breathe so she could answer. The unspoken warning of the consequences befalling a vague answer hung between them. Even so, she expressed no terror. Kneeling at Kirei's knees, she weakly gasped for oxygen pitifully, but the look that she gave Kirei continued to harbor a victor's derision and superiority; Kirei seemed to be the one kneeling.

"All right, I'll tell you—Emiya Kiritsugu's lasting hope is to save humanity. It is to end all wars and bloodshed and achieve eternal world peace."

That only seemed like jestful nonsense to Kirei, who burst out laughing after a while. "—What was that?"

"You can't understand it. That is the difference between you and him. You believe in nothing, unlike him."

Was this woman really talking about the man Emiya Kiritsugu? Kirei had his doubts. What kind of man did Emiya Kiritsugu pretend to be in front of this woman?

"... Woman, what are you to Emiya Kiritsugu?"

"I gave birth to his child as his wife. I've looked into his heart and shared his worries for the past nine years ... unlike you, who has never seen him."

Nine years ... Perhaps he had passed such a long time in a lie? Despite his doubts, Kirei instinctively felt it to be impossible. What existed in this woman's heart was undoubtedly her trust of Emiya Kiritsugu. It was unimaginable that such a strong

personality would form within her based on an empty lie; she was only an ordinary homunculus after all. The focus of his anger began to shift away from the woman. Kirei gave out a melancholic sigh and sat down onto the chair next to him.

"Irisviel von Einsbern, were you always a good wife in those nine years? Did you win Emiya Kiritsugu's love?"

"... Why do you care?"

"I don't understand the bond between you two—you took pride in having Emiya Kiritsugu as your husband, trusting him like a real couple. But if Emiya Kiritsugu is a man who seeks the Holy Grail, you would be just a tool for the fulfillment of his wish. He has no reason to give you something as unnecessary as love."

"... I won't forgive you for mocking his stupidity." Decisive words spoken by one who held something inviolable. "... I had no parents; I was not a product of love. I could not understand what a good wife is. Even so ... the love he gave me is my entire world. No one can humiliate that."

"Then, Irisviel, you're a perfect wife." Kirei said as if making a disinterested judgement. It was neither praise nor sarcasm. "But I can't understand Emiya Kiristugu because of that. If he, as a husband, loves you, then why ... why would he want eternal world peace? Why would he sacrifice his loved one for such a pointless aspiration?"

"... Such an odd question. You, a man who admits he has no reason for existence, would mock others and call their aspirations meaningless?"

"Any sensible adult would have laughed at him." This was a completely different anger. Kirei's heart swelled. "Combat is

humanity's instinct. Eliminating it is no different from eliminating humanity. What else could be more pointless? This so-called aspiration of Emiya Kiritsugu's—it is no aspiration to begin with, but the dream of a child!"

"... That is why he could only rely on a miracle ..." Irisviel, trying to keep her calm, continued speaking. "He lost everything for the aspiration he sought. He always suffered through his punishment for wanting to save those who could not be saved, and everything around him was robbed ... I am also someone taken away from him. He has been forced to discard his loved ones many times ..."

Kirei stood up from his chair and gazed at Irisviel with a bottomless and gloomy look. "You're saying this is not the only instance—this is his manner of existence?"

"Yes. Kiritsugu is far too gentle. He does not hold back on his love, even knowing he will lose those around him ..."

Those answers were enough for Kirei. He had lost all interest in the homunculus.

"... I understand." He grasped the woman's neck with his strong fingertips, ceasing her blood circulation. Looking at the weak and painful expression, Kirei calmly said. "I finally understand. So ... this is Emiya Kiritsugu." He tossed the unconscious woman aside and gazed emptily into the darkness.

In retrospect, he had been wrong from the start—his question was answered, but his anticipation became disappointment. Emiya Kiritsugu was not looking for the truth in meaningless repetition. He had simply consigned all meaningful things to nothingness. He did not wish for nothing; his wish was so ridiculous that he fell

into a cycle of nothingness. His futile efforts and waste was unsalvageably foolish. Perhaps Kiritsugu could see through Kotomine Kirei's empty heart, and perhaps he would fear that emptiness and be alarmed. However, he would never be able to imagine the meaning of having such an emptiness. He could never hope to understand the fervent desire that Kirei harbored. Emiya Kiritsugu's life could be summed up as the discarding of everything. The joy and happiness he had discarded—even its fragments were important enough in Kirei's eyes for him to protect with his life or even die for.

To one like Kirei, lost and unable to find any such joy and happiness, Kiritsugu's life existed only as dreams and admiration. His insatiable thirst and irrecoverable loss had been belittled and mocked in such a way—how could he endure this? How could he not hate this? The sombre emotions swelling in his heart twisted Kirei's smile. He finally understood the meaning of this war. He had absolutely no interest in the Holy Grail. It did not matter if he had no thoughts of fulfilling a wish. But if he could break the dreams of this man, who had gambled everything upon this miracle, with his own hands . . . then even the Holy Grail, though meaningless to him, would have a use in his hands.

The excitement of impending battle made Kirei's hands tremble. The rising desire of battle burned in his heart, a desire to pierce everything before him with his Black Keys. In the darkness murky with the stench of blood, Kotomine Kirei laughed. It was something that had never ceased in all these long years—the throbbing of his soul.

– 04:16:49

Waver woke from a deep, dreamless sleep. What he saw when he opened his eyes was a blackness like that of sleep. The thicket in which he had fallen asleep during the daytime was now mired in hazy starlit darkness. The curtain of night had descended again. To those who commanded Servants, this was an unavoidable time of battle. The night wind, bitter cold as murderous intent, did not make him uneasy in the slightest; beside him was a presence that could vanish this fear and unease.

Rider, already materialized, had made thorough preparation for battle, and was now flipping through his anthology of Homer's poetry. The hardcover, so heavy and depressing to Waver, was small and thin to the King of Conquerors. He was completely immersed in the world of words. Flipping through the book, his gestures were enthusiastic; he especially cherished details as minute as the touch under his fingertips.

He seems very fond of the book—Waver could not help but smile wryly. If he were to suddenly ask Rider, "why were you born into this world?" his reply might not be his ambition to conquer the world, but something like "without fingers, I would be unable to read this anthology of Homer's poetry." He was a hero whose heart yearned for something far away, who enjoyed good food and wine, who regarded his ambition of conquering the world to be a desire as common as eating or sleeping. This peculiar personality had drawn many men to follow him for a lifetime. Such a man had existed in human history.

"—Nn? Kid, are you awake?"

Though Rider had already read Achilles' adventures countless times before, his interest was nevertheless undiminished. He smiled like a mischievous child as he looked at Waver. Perhaps he would always show this smile, no matter for whom. No matter if it was for the heroes with which he had lived and died side by side, or for a Master with no redeeming qualities, like Waver.

"Did I not tell you to wake me as soon as it was night? What exactly are you doing?"

"Ah, sorry. I got engrossed in reading without realizing it. But the night is still young; we don't have to be so anxious tonight. Facing it at ease will be all right."

"Why?"

The subsequent question caused the large man to open his mouth, then fall into thought.

"... Oh. I don't have any proof, but I have a premonition that there might be a decisive battle tonight." He said it like it was no problem. Waver nodded lightly and did not question Rider's reasoning. He could not explain why, but the air that brushed against his skin gave him the feeling that Heaven's Feel had entered a climactic stage. If it had to be put in words—the air tonight was too peaceful.

As far as Waver knew, the only eliminated opponents were Assassin, whom Rider had personally crushed, and Caster, who had been defeated at Mion River. But of course, in places he could not see, the battle was still ongoing, still developing.

Every day and night, he could feel the unusual presences in this town changing, shifting from a chaotic commotion to a heavy

sense of urgency. This was one of the reasons the impatience he now felt did not leave as much of an impression in his mind as the anxiety caused by Saber, whom they had fought last night. It seems an emergency situation had also emerged in the Einsbern camp. He did not attempt to contradict Rider's instinct; the King of Conquerors had rode through innumerable battlefields, issuing commands and strategies, and his sixth sense was much more reliable than the inexperienced Waver.

Lord El-Melloi, be he alive or dead—news concerning his once-hated enemy only made him feel vaguely sad now. Waver had already experienced the unimaginably difficult self-cultivation required to head into battle with a Heroic Spirit. Though he was reputed to be a genius in thaumaturgy, Heaven's Feel could not be surmised according to the logic of magi. There was once a time when El-Melloi had undergone the same difficult self-cultivation; he felt satisfaction—and at the same time, a thread of sympathy as well. Among the six Masters, Kayneth alone had a shared connection with Waver, regardless of the positivity of the relationship.

That such feelings could be evoked in him toward an opponent whom he had fought bitterly since they had first met—Waver once again felt the change in the workings of his heart. Yes; no matter what the premonition was, to him, Heaven's Feel was as good as ended. The moment he sighed, a light yet distinct impact dispersed his drowsiness.

"What—is this?"

"This surge of prana is very strange, yet familiar."

Hearing Rider say this, Waver remembered the smoke signal with which the Holy Church had summoned the Masters. This was the same signal.

He walked out of the thicket to take a look at the sky; in the northeast, there was a flash of magical lightning, accompanied by colors even brighter than those of the first summons.

"This shape is . . ."

"What is this? A sort of sign?"

Hearing Rider's question, Waver, though unsure, nodded his head. "Different color, four and seven . . . 'emperor'—accomplishment, and 'chariot'—victory. This sort of signal . . . could it mean the winner of Heaven's Feel has already been determined?"

Waver's explanation made Rider furrow his brow. "What is this? Treating me as if I don't exist? Who's this who has stolen victory?"

This was truly strange. Victory in Heaven's Feel could only be achieved by eliminating all the enemy Masters and Servants. As things stood, Rider and Waver were still standing; how could a declaration of victory be made?

". . . Also, that is not where Fuyuki Church is. This is very strange. Perhaps it's not a signal from the Church."

"Ah. If you put it that way, that's a possibility I can accept." Hearing Waver's doubt, Rider snorted disdainfully through his nose and nodded his head.

"Wh—what's the matter?"

"Some impatient fellow must have taken it upon himself to declare victory with the challenge, 'If you object, then come here.'

In other words, it is meant to draw opponents to the decisive battleground that he himself designated." Rider gave a sinister laugh. Staring at the smoke signal shining in the sky, he seemed to be saying 'that coincides with my own intentions.' "Very good, very good. Now I can be spared the effort of searching. I don't think any Servant will be able to sit still after this sort of challenge. The ones who are still alive will definitely gather around the smoke signal—hn, like I thought, tonight is the night of the decisive battle." The King of Conquerors' burly frame trembled with joy and fighting spirit.

Waver regarded the strong and brave Heroic Spirit with an icy gaze, as if waiting and watching from a distance. "Is that so? It's finally the last phase."

"That's right. Since the battleground has already been decided, I cannot bring shame to the Rider class." Rider drew the Celtic longsword and raised it high into the sky. "Appear, my precious steed!"

Accompanying the call, a radiance pierced space and shone forth from the torn void. Shining with the light of Heroic Spirits, a familiar steed appeared—the hoofed Heroic Spirit horse, Bucephalus. The precious legendary horse had once carried the King of Conquerors to trample upon the eastern world. Today, it passed through time to return to its aly's side. Speeding across the tarred road, it gave a cry of thirst for battle.

Alexander's trump card, Ionioi Hetairoi, required the opening of a Reality Marble to correct interference from the world if its various aspects were to be gathered together. Nonetheless, like Mithrenes, who had taken on the role of messenger at Mion

River, the appearance of a single horse and rider was within the boundaries of ordinary occurrence. Having lost Gordius Wheel, Rider could now unleash his riding skill on its back.

"Come, kid. Even if it's not as stable as sitting in the charioteer's seat, put up with it for a while. Come up here." Rider, on his beloved horse, nudged his body backward to make space for Waver. Nevertheless, Waver smiled wryly and shook his head. Only heroes were qualified to ride on the back of a steed that was second to none in the whole world. It was not a place for ordinary youngsters, like a useless magus who could not even cast a hypnosis spell, the most basic of spells, or a clown who overrated himself and only got in the way of the despotic path of the King. The glorious road on which the King of Conquerors was about to gallop forth could not be sullied for such arbitrary characters.

The night before, Waver understood that he, the Master, was the one who had caused Rider's determination to falter at the last moment, in the challenge against Saber. Then, if Rider had challenged the Sword of Promised Victory with desperate heart, he would have been victorious over Saber's Noble Phantasm by a small distance, trampling the King of Knights beneath the hooves of the divine bulls. he gave up at the decisive moment because of the Master beside him in the driver's seat. At the last instant, the only way to protect the jester beside him was to leap from the chariot—he could not sacrifice the contractor who had made him appear in this world. At that time, the decisive factor for victory had been the presence of the Master at the Servants' side.

Waver Velvet once thought he had what it took to be a victor, and he had been complacent. Now, he was different. Two weeks

had passed, during which he had witnessed true heroes in action; he now understood his own useless and meager existence. A dog without a home has its own intentions as well. At the very least, it could gaze upon that back, the nobility of which it can never match—

"My Servant. I, Waver Velvet, order with this Command Seal." The youth raised his tightly clenched right hand, displaying the unused Command Seals. These were the shackles that bound the Heroic Spirit before his eyes, the greatest obstacle that blocked his despotic road.

"Rider, you must take the final victory." This was not a restriction, only a matter-of-course judgment. His heart was light as he watched the first of the Command Seals unleash its prana and disappear.

"Again I order with this Command Seal—Rider, you must seize the Grail." The second Command Seal also vanished; he felt a thread of pain in his heart for this light. If he stayed his hand now, there would still be time—this meaningless confusion swept across his heart. It was a fool's hesitation not worth mentioning.

"Lastly, I order with this Command Seal." Waver resolutely raised the hand on which the last Command Seal was drawn, looking at the King who rode on the horse's back. In that instant, Waver could meet his eyes without the slightest show of timidity. This was his last and only glory as a Master. "Rider, you must seize the whole world. Failure will not be tolerated." Swiftly liberated, the third holy mark radiated hidden prana; summoning a whirlwind, it disappeared. Waver the magus would probably never again have the chance to perform such tremendous

thaumaturgy in his life. Even so, this was the most satisfying, heatfelt action he had ever taken in his life. He had no regret whatsoever. This was sufficient compensation for his loss.

Waver lowered his head to look at his own hands. The proof of the contract etched on his hand had already vanished without trace. Looking at his feet with bowed head, he declared, "and thus, I am no longer your Master." He did not want to know what expression Rider wore as he looked at him. Perhaps it was surprise at Waver's cowardly act of giving up the fight; perhaps it was a relieved smile at having been freed from the hands of a useless Master. Regardless of which it was, Waver did not want to see it. If it were possible, he even wished that Rider would forget the entire process of their encounter.

"Go. Go anywhere. You are already . . ."

Oh, rang out the quiet reply. He should now be hearing the sound of swift galloping growing distant over the land. Instead, he was lifted by the collar, and in the next instant he was sitting on Bucephalus's back.

"Of course I will go at once—but since you have given such an annoying command, surely you too are determined? Come to witness the moment in which the order is fulfilled."

"You, you, you idiot! I say, eh!"

His will having been changed so easily, Waver cried out awkwardly. Bucephalus gave a rough snort through its nose, mocking his panic. Even that horse mocked people like its rider did!—Thinking this, driven by an indignation even he did not understand, Waver cried out.

"I don't have my Command Seals any more! I don't want to be a Master any more! Why do you still want to take me with you? I —"

"Master or otherwise, you are my friend, and that will never change."

Waver knew that these words, spoken with the selfsame smile, were directed at him. In that instant, the hardest part of his heart crumbled—only a moment was required to destroy what he had protected all his life.

The tears flooded like a spring from his eyes, mixing with snot as they flowed past his nose; he found it difficult to breathe, and even more difficult to make a sound. He asked in a choked voice. "... I ... someone like me ... can ... can I really ... be by your side ...?"

"After going forth into battle with me so many times, why are you saying all this? You idiot." The King of Conquerors poked fun at the youth's tears like one at a bantering banquet. He slapped his thin, weak shoulders. "Aren't you a real man who has faced enemies with me? That makes you a friend. Stick out your chest and stand shoulder to shoulder with me."

Waver forgot his self-deprecation, the mortification before that day, the timidity toward tomorrow, and fear of the moment of death. 'Fight and win'—this unshakable conviction took root in his heart. There would be no failure, no disgrace; he was now with the King, and as long as one believed and continued to run forth on the despotic road, one would set foot, no matter how unreliable those feet, on the edge of the world—this he firmly believed.

"I shall give my answer to the first Command Seal now. Open your eyes wide and look properly, boy."

"Ah, I will definitely watch with these eyes!"

The legendary steed gave a cry of assured victory and began to gallop, carrying the King and magus, hearts now linked, rushing toward the decisive battle with a mortal enemy. The location indicated by the smoke signal was the opposite bank of the Mion river, the fourth leyline of Fuyuki.

– 04:10:33

Fuyuki Municipal Hall—built to the tune of eight billion yen, it was considered the symbol of Fuyuki Shinto's development, along with the Central Building in front of the train station. It covered 6,600 square meters, with 4,700 square meters of that being usable space. Its complex design housed four floors above ground and one floor below. The two-storey music hall could accommodate about 3,000 patrons. The building's prestigious architect had created a novel design that made this modern municipal hall as majestic and splendid as an ancient shrine. Fuyuki city's high ambition toward Shinto's development could thus be perceived in physical form.

However, only the exterior was complete. The interior was still being decorated in preparation for the commemoration ceremony. Active and practical use of the building was still a long way off. In addition to the minimal level of safety precautions taken, the building still had no electricity supply. Deep in the night, with no workers on site, this pristine and splendid building became an unreal space, inhumanly silent, and an alien feeling wafted and drifted through its emptiness.

Civil planning did not take magecraft into consideration; it was a complete coincidence that the Municipal Hall had been built above Fuyuki's latest leyline—in other words, such a rare coincidence could only be attributed to the paranormal characteristics bestowed upon the area by the leyline.

Kotomine Kirei stood on the rooftop and calmly watched the magecraft signals he had set off scatter to smoke in the night wind. The only thing he had had to do to infiltrate the unguarded building was break the lock. He had already made preparations for the ceremony, and was ready to face an attack. All that was left was to stay and wait for the remaining enemies to be attracted by the signal.

Battle was near, yet he did not seem affected by the thought at all. Executors had no need of excitement at the prospect of bloodshed, nor did they need to jest to relieve the tension. Possessing ideal characteristics as tools of God's will, they could leap toward death with hearts knowing only the routine completion of yet another duty. Long years of such training allowed Kirei to display the calm and nonchalance of a practicing surgeon. However—

"Hmph. Your face tonight is as cold as ever, Kirei." Archer, who was walking up to the rooftop with a relaxed gait, mocked him, and Kirei laughed bitterly in his heart. What did his face, emotionless as always, look like in the eyes of this Heroic Spirit who could see through everything? Even the shifts in his emotions which he himself could not detect did not escape the Heroic Spirit's eyes. Though his heart had wavered, Kirei was used to it by now. Yes, he was a cold man in truth—he understood himself as one analyzing the business of another.

The King of Heroes, who had just returned from the night market in the street, still wore his flamboyant and luxurious casual clothing. A residual tint of indulgence remained in those crimson eyes, and he showed no sense of urgency at the

approaching battle. However, this Heroic Spirit would never separate his outer appearance from his inner feelings. The battle surrounding the Holy Grail only seemed like child's play to him.

"What do you want me to do next, Kirei? Just wait here?"

One wrong command could make Archer question the worth of his Master. Kirei, who knew this very well, shook his head after having thought about it for a while.

"The ceremony will be in jeopardy if your power is released close to the Holy Grail. If you want to have fun, attack them head-on."

"Mm, fine. But what do you plan to do if you're attacked while I'm away?"

"Get Berserker to stall the enemies, and summon you back in that time. I would have to borrow the power of the Command Seals though. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"It is permissible. However, I can't guarantee the safety of the Holy Grail. I won't be merciful tonight. This narrow little room may be completely destroyed."

"That's the worst outcome, but it would also be fate." Kirei nodded decisively, but Archer narrowed his eyes.

"Kirei, it seems you've understood the meaning of this war. But do you still not have a wish to bestow upon the Holy Grail? Not a single wish, even if you do manage to obtain the miracle?"

"That's right. What's wrong with that?"

"Although it is yet to be completed, the vessel is already in your hands. It may accept a pre-ordered wish, you know."

"... Hmm, I see. You're saying that, if possible, a miracle can occur at the same time when the Holy Grail descends, right?"

Kirei sighed disinterestedly and thought about it for a while, before shaking his head. "I still don't have a wish. If I have to have one—then I wish there would be no innocent people meddling in the final battle. Unfortunately, there are residents all around us. I would have liked to fight for my victory somewhere desolate if possible."

At this completely boring answer, Gilgamesh said with derision. "Hah, the thing hiding in your heart will only be truly understood in the presence of the Holy Grail." At the end of the day, even if those two were closer to the Holy Grail than anyone else, they also cared the least for it. For them, chasing the ones gathering around the Grail was more meaningful than gaining it.

"—Ah, there's one more thing. If Saber appears before I return —" As he was about to depart, the King of Heroes halted in his steps, suddenly remembering something. "—Let Berserker play with her for a little while. I saved that mad dog's life just for this."

"Understood." Kirei still could not figure out the reason why Archer was so bent on Saber. As for Berserker, who had longed to destroy the King of Heroes after their initial battle, things were different. The King of Heroes had allowed Berserker's continued existence after discovering his true name in his investigation of Matou Kariya. He had said, "It'll be entertaining to let that dog bite Saber." The King of Heroes could always control his anger whenever it came to Saber; it seemed Gilgamesh was very interested in the King of Knights.

"Say, Kirei, how's that doll, the one Saber protected with her life? I heard that whatchamacallit—vessel of the Grail—is in it."

"Ah, that's what you meant." Kirei did not want to mention its existence. His interest was gone at this stage; he did not even feel the need to remember the woman's name.

"I just killed her. There was no longer any reason to keep her alive."

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Irisviel opened her eyes and looked around. She felt very strange. Her consciousness was impeccably clear, yet she could not think logically. It seemed it was not her mentality that was muddled and nonsensical, but the world she was in. Many scenes flashed past her eyes. As she beheld them, the only emotion that welled up within her heart was an unbearable sorrow and emptiness.

The scenes reflected in her eyes were eternally sundered from happiness or joy. That was the only constant in this kaleidoscope of confusion. There was pain, there was humiliation, and there was regret, hatred, and loss. Bloodshed; a desolate land. Betrayal, and vengeance. Devoting everything, yet receiving nothing in return—it was an expensive cycle which reaped no reward.

The familiar snow-covered scene continued. It was recounting the story of a clan that had sealed all it possessed within a castle of deep winter. And here she finally remembered—what she was looking at was the Einsbern family's thousand-year pilgrimage for the Holy Grail.

The primeval Justizia and the female dolls modeled after her were homunculi, fake living beings, disposable humanoids created with the secret craft of alchemy, and used to fulfill the
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unattainable wish. This lost and confused history of the Einsbern clan was written with their blood and tears as ink, and their broken bones and frozen fingertips as pens. Their sighs and their despair made Irisviel's heart clench tight.

The one place that allowed her to see all this was the epicenter of the entire conflict, within the thing that had witnessed all. Irisviel finally understood—she was looking inside the Holy Grail, the Greater Grail of Mount Enzou, that embraced the primeval Justizia. All homunculi were manufactured with the Lady of Winter as the standard, and modelled after her. Therefore, they shared the same pain. But was that really the truth?

"Why are you crying, Mother?"

When she came to, Irisviel discovered that she was in the room of her child, protected by the warmth of the fireplace. Icy wind and snow gathered outside the window and the storm roared past. A pair of tiny hands clutched her mother's arms tightly in search of protection.

"Mother, Ilya had a nightmare. Ilya dreamt that she became a wine cup." Though her heart was terrified, Ilyaviel's two red eyes still looked at Irisviel with trust. Though her face looked the same as her mother's and all of her sisters', this child was different. She was more adorable than anyone else—

"There were seven big blocks in Ilya's heart. When Ilya felt like she was about to break, so scared but she couldn't run away, she heard Lady Justizia's voice, and there was a big black hole above my head . . ."

Iriviel embraced her daughter tightly. Her silver-white fringe brushed past her daughter's face, which was wet with tears.

"It's all right, it's all right . . . That won't happen. You won't see such things, Ilya." There was one sad wish that only Irisviel, of all her innumerable sisters, possessed and could not share with anyone else—the maternal love of a mother. Of the many generations of homunculi, she had been the first to give birth to a child from her womb. Of her kind, only she had been given love for her child.

Even so, the fate she carried was just as lamentable. Ilyasviel von Einsbern was the next Vessel of the Grail, also a mechanical part swept up in the millennium-aged cogwheel of delusion and stubbornness. This shackle would not break until someone claimed victory. The Third Magic, the Cup of Heaven—that achievement was the only salvation.

Many sounds rushed toward Irisviel. She chanted with her countless sisters. *The Holy Grail—Please grant the Holy Grail into my hands—*

Deep within the forest, where the used homunculi were discarded, the mountain of corpses of her kin chanted. Those rotten, maggot-infested faces overlapped with Ilya's young and small face, emitting those painful sounds.

"It's all right—" Full of love, the mother hugged her daughter tightly in her arms. "Ilya, you'll definitely be freed from this shackle of fate. I will finish everything. Your daddy will definitely fulfill this wish as well . . ."

At that moment, a question suddenly flashed past her thoughts. If this was a dream conjured by the Holy Grail—since she could see the manifested Vessel within so clearly—what would Irisviel, who served as the outer cover, look like now?

Like an eggshell seeing the innards of the chick. This would be a giant contradiction. The shell was supposed to break when the chick hatched.

Then—who was she, the Irisviel that was now dreaming? The touch of Ilyasviel's slender body, which she was hugging tightly, was so realistic. Irisviel looked to her own hands, which were hugging her daughter. Irisviel had already disappeared. If the chick had consumed the broken shell . . .

The falling snow outside the window suddenly stopped. What melted into the darkness of the night was a thick black mud that stirred ripples. She was neither scared nor surprised; she only comprehended it calmly and gazed upon it. The mud seeped in from all corners of the room and dripped from the chimney, slowly soaking into the ground under her feet.

Yes, the question of 'who am I?' was so minuscule. She had been no one from the start. Even now, she was merely using the personality of Irisviel, a woman who had already disappeared, as a mask. Even so, Irisviel's hidden wish was still true. It was the wish of a mother who thought of her beloved daughter and lamented the future of her child, even as she drew her last breath and passed away. She had inherited the wish of this mother. She was the one who must fulfill that wish. She was the existence that had been worshipped and anticipated, because she was to grant everyone's wish, because she was made to be the one.

"—It's all right, Ilyasviel. Everything is about to end." Gently, she murmured beside the ear of the young girl, whom she was embracing for the first time. "Let us wait here awhile. Father will definitely come. He'll come to help us fulfill all of our wishes."

The scorching mud that clung tightly to her elegantly dyed her skirt black. As she waited for the moment of wish-granting, the woman smiled, body entangled in the inky darkness. Dispel all sorrows, chase away all worries. Soon, she would receive the power to fulfill wishes, and become the omnipotent wish-granting vessel that could realize all.

Act 16

– 04:08:29

2AM. The streets were asleep in an unusually deep and complete silence. Even the resident night owls, perhaps terrified by the repeated incidents, obeyed the appeal for self-imposed curfews, and were submissively drawn into their homes. Even the shadows of cars had disappeared from the road. The asphalt, clearly lit by street lights alone, was frozen by the air of the winter night.

This townscape, where human life had completely ceased, belonged in a scene with life-size toys. Night-time Fuyuki was beyond the recognition of normal humans; an alien world. A single heroic horse sprinted across that bizarre landscape, as though claiming ownership. Waver was carried on its vigorous back, hurrying toward his place of death. Right behind him was the massive and magnificent torso of the King of Conquerors, so close that even its pounding heartbeats were transmitted.

Even if he were to survive this night, Waver would never forget this tense, silent exaltation: the moment of truth, when the soul, bared and released from all deception and embellishment,

took in the sweeping view of the world in its true state. That instant knew nothing but the shaking of the heart. Surely, that was what he was reflecting upon right now; the instant when any and all of the world's mysteries and paradoxes were understood, yet remained unanswered; the instant the meaning of existence and the value of death could be clearly grasped without words. It was a time of supreme bliss, of release from all bewilderment and uncertainty, from the hardships of human life.

The warhorse leisurely slipped out of the sleeping city and leaped toward the riverbank, its still surface colored by darkness. In the still night, the great bridge they were headed for was lit white by the brilliance of hollow mercury lamps.

"Rider, that's . . ."

The King of Conquerors responded to the pointing Waver with a nod. Standing on the bridge, illuminated as if by broad daylight, the figure's brilliantly golden, majestic appearance radiated all the more, sneering at such counterfeits as artificial light. The remorseless coldness of his deep crimson glint froze Waver with fear across the distance, hundreds of meters apart.

That was Archer, the King of Heroes—Gilgamesh. From the beginning, he had understood that this was an unavoidable opponent. Still, now that he was facing the real thing once again, the air of intimidation overcame the heart's defenses and came to crush the core of his soul.

"You scared, boy?" Rider, who felt Waver's shaking, asked quietly. The boy frankly nodded without any pretense of bravery.

"Yeah, I'm scared. Or I guess, to put it your way, my heart is jumping with excitement."

At his tense response, the King of Conquerors' face broke into a pleased smile. "That's exactly it. When the enemy is mighty, the yearning for the sweet wine of victory becomes utter bliss. Oh ho, looks like you understand it now."

Bucephalus strode majestically, carrying the bravely boasting Rider to the foot of the bridge. This meeting was their fourth, and would be their final one. To the primordial King of Heroes and the legendary King of Conquerors, both occupying the wide four-lane road like rightful owners, the only obstacle in their path was each other. On the one-way bridge, one would not back down, and the other would not try to evade. Between the two kingly beings, it was an inevitable, even fated battlefield for a competition of tyranny. Bucephalus stopped his hooves, halting at the will of his rider, who rewarded him by scratching his mane.

"Boy, wait here for now."

"—Huh?"

Rider lowered himself from the back of his beloved horse, stood on the ground, and began walking with an air of composure toward the waiting enemy. As though it had been prearranged, Archer also began walking to meet him halfway, his heels ringing out haughtily. The warriors were not competing with martial skills alone; the competition of tyranny, in addition to crossing of swords, had to proceed through proper channels.

"Rider, where is your vaunted chariot?" As soon as he opened his mouth, Archer questioned him with restless anger.

"Ah, that. Well. Aggravatingly, Saber has carried it off." Rider shrugged in carefree fashion. Archer stared at him, scrutinizing with his blood-colored eyes.

"... Did you forget what I had decided? You were informed that you would be defeated at your most perfect condition."

"Hm, now that you mention it, that's right." Unintimidated, Rider curled his lips and smiled, bold and ferocious. "True, my weapon has been consumed. But do not take me lightly, King of Heroes. Tonight, Alexander is incomplete, and therefore beyond complete."

It was an incoherent manner of speaking, but Archer did not sneer at his nonsense, and looked over Rider's entire body with sharp eyes that seemed to cut into him. "—I see. Yes, your aura is overflowing. It is unusually stalwart. It seems you do not stand before me without some prospect of victory."

It was the truth. Though he had lost one of his Noble Phantasms, prana seethed from Rider, several times higher than before. The three Command Seals Waver had meant to squander were unwittingly exercising an effect. The vaguer the command, the more dilute the effect of the Command Seal, but a command given with both parties' consent would support and amplify them. Rider, in his current state, was more perfect than he had ever been.

"Speaking of decisions, Archer, was there not one more agreement from our banquet before?"

"That we would have no choice but to kill one another?"

"Did we not say we would finish the rest of the wine before that?" Rider, with an honest smile unthinkable in mortal combat, urged the King of Heroes. "At that time, some boorish fellows tried to spoil our banquet ... but there was still something left in the bottle. You can't fool my eyes."

"As expected of the king of usurpation. You are sharp-sighted when it comes to the belongings of others." Archer, with a bitter smile, once again called forth a set of drinking vessels from the vault to his hand. The bottle was emptied, and the rest of the quality wine from the Age of the Gods at its bottom was poured completely into two cups. Like two boxers crossing gloves, they solemnly knocked their cups together.

"One more thing, King of Babylon. My last summation to you."

"Permitted. State it."

His goblet still raised, a serious face with a rascally glint of naïveté, Alexander began. "Hypothetically, if my Ionioi Hetairoi was equipped by your Gate of Babylon, it would undoubtedly be the most powerful army. Even the President of the West would be nothing more than a gust of wind."

"Hm . . . And?"

"Once again, will you not be my ally? In alliance, we can surely conquer as far as the ends of the stars."

At this satire, the King of Heroes guffawed without care. "How deeply amusing you are. It has been a long time since I have laughed this much at something other than a jester's foolish nonsense." Even as he laughed, the ruthless dread did not weaken in the slightest. Killing intent was the delight of this golden ruler. "It is unfortunate, but I do not require a second friend. In the past, and the future to come, I had and will have only one companion. There need not be two kingly ones."

At such a resolute response, the King of Conquerors simply nodded quietly without showing his dejection. "That is a high and

lonely kingship. I shall challenge that unshakable state of affairs with great admiration."

"Good. Display yourself to your heart's desire, King of Conquerors. You are a foe worthy of my judgment."

The two Kings gulped down their last drink together, disposed of the emptied cups, and turned back on their heels, returning to their respective bridgeheads without looking back.

Waver, watching the last toast tensely, met the King's return with a sigh. "Do you two actually get along?"

"Well, we'll be killing each other now. He could be the last opponent I will ever exchange glances with. I can't be ungrateful."

"... Don't be stupid." Waver countered Alexander's joking tone with a stifled voice. "There's no way you can be killed. I won't accept that. Did you forget my Command Seals?"

"That's right—yeah, that's it." With an intrepid smile, Rider once again straddled the back of the waiting Bucephalus and unsheathed the sword affixed to his hip.

"Gather, my brethren! Tonight, we shall mark our gallant figures into the strongest legend!"

A wind of hot sand blew onto the bridge in response to the King's call, scattering the mist from the river. The thoughts of the Heroic Spirits who had once seen the same dream as the King, drawn from beyond time and space, now came together and wove around the sword of the Cypriots. They would gaze with a single heart at that boundless blue sky, that horizon, blurred by the heat haze, to ascertain its very end. The mental image of the brave ones, crossing time to seek the battlefield, eroded reality and turned the uninhabited great bridge into a great plain with a

raging whirlwind. One by one, the Heroic Spirits hastened to the stage of the decisive battle they had been ordered to.

"Ahh . . ."

This was the second time Waver had seen the spectacle of the arrayed Ionioi Hetairoi in their magnificence. It no longer shocked him, but with newfound appreciation of the meaning behind this ultimate Noble Phantasm which actualized Alexander's kingship, he was overwhelmed by a greater sense of awe. The shining elites of the cavalry once shared a bond with their lord, the King of Conquerors, enabling them to overcome even the separation of life from the afterlife. There was no place where their battlefield, sublimed into eternity, could not be actualized. If the King of Conquerors were to set forth again in tyranny, his servants would hasten to him wherever he was. That was the pride of being with the King, the joy of battle, of their hot surging blood.

"Our enemy is the King of Heroes, mightier than tens of thousands—an opponent lacking in no regard! Come, heroic warriors, show the original Heroic Spirit the way of our tyranny!"

At Alexander's roar, the cheers of the arrayed troops rose into the air. Archer stood alone before them, confronting the great host which boiled like the high seas, without a speck of distress, blocking their path imposingly. His appearance, painted in gold, was like a single arduous towering peak. The air of intimidation was unprecedented, and unmistakably that of a demigod Heroic Spirit.

"Come, lord of the vanquishers. Now you shall know the true form of a King . . ."

At the boldly boasting King of Heroes, the host of Heroic Spirits, led by the heroic horse Bucephalus, finally charged in a wedge formation. Rider bellowed as he spearheaded the vanguard. Answering his roar, the knights released a battle cry. To the surging waves and harsh thundering songs, Waver added his own small voice with all his might.

"A—lalalalaie!"

– 03:59:48

At that moment, Saber was wandering aimlessly around eastern Shinto in search of Irisviel. Naturally, she too noticed the smoke signal sent out at Fuyuki Municipal Hall. Though she did not understand the significance of the signal, it undoubtedly had something to do with Heaven's Feel. Like a critically ill person seeking any doctor as a lifeline, Saber immediately turned the vehicle and sped in the direction of the signal's flare. Without need to cross the Mion River, she quickly arrived at the Fuyuki Municipal Hall without encountering Archer and Rider. Revving the V-4 engine, she rode onto the front porch, surrounded by fresh walls.

There was no sign of the enemy in sight, and she did not sense any killing intent in the surrounding darkness. In that case—was the enemy hiding within the building? She turned the V-Max around to the guiding road designated for visitors, followed the sloping path that extended below the building, and entered the underground parking area.

Here, where the moonlight could not reach, the white light of the headlights cut through the darkness to shine on the icy cement wall. The wide car park, designed to accommodate more than a hundred cars, had not been opened for use yet; only several cars from the construction company were parked here and there, and the rest of the empty space was heavy with dust. The gruff roar of the V-Max's engine was swallowed by the strange, crypt-like silence. Saber warily glanced at her surroundings. All around

her was dense darkness, and the shadows of support pillars all over the place . . . an extremely suitable place for the enemy to hide. The murderous intent that saturated the air was palpable to her instincts.

"Ah . . ." From the floor came a resentful sigh; it sounded like the groaning of the dead from a dark abyss. She could not have misheard it, for she had been its target many times. "Urr—!"

She reacted immediately to the explosion that closely followed the roar, twisting and retreating quickly. Left behind, the V-Max, surrounded by a rain of flame, was turned into a shapeless heap of scrap in an instant. The scent of acrid gunpowder wafted toward Saber.

"This weapon is—" Saber had an impression of it. This was the rain of fire that had turned Lancer's Master and the rest—the terrible victims of Emiya Kiritsugu's calculations—into pitiful corpses. It was the mechanized ballistic weapon that had become mainstream in this modern world.

In the depths of the darkness, red lotuses of flame blossomed once more. Under the muzzle's flash, the black shadow of Berserker lengthened to a state of deformity as it gestured threateningly on the walls of the underground parking area. Without the slightest hesitation, Saber leapt into the air, dashing through a hail of flying lead bullets; their destructive power tore a large hole in the concrete ground and walls. That power was obviously not of the same caliber as Maiya's weapon. Even as a Servant, Saber sensed that a single hit could wound her fatally; she gnashed her teeth in anger.

Of course, she could not have known how Berserker had obtained the submachine guns. Each of the crazed black knight's hands held a modern firearm that Kotomine Kirei had prepared using his position as Supervisor; Berserker nimbly operated them like extensions of his own hands. The firearms' structure and holster were all mired in the hated prana, and had turned into fierce magecraft-enhanced military-grade equipment that posed a threat even to Saber.

"[redacted]"

Following the roar, the machine guns screeched heatedly, attacking Saber. The bullets, faster than the speed of sound, could not surpass the speed of Saber's sword, but at a rate of twenty-odd rounds per second, she was only able to parry. Upgraded to Noble Phantasm class, the difference in power between the firearms and a sword-type armament forced Saber into a decisively disadvantageous situation.

As the building's construction was not yet finished, a large number of paint cans had been piled in one corner of the parking lot. One of the stray bullets struck them, and the calcined bullet caused the solvent to explode. The underground darkness dissipated in red lotuses of flame.

Saber was so restricted by the curtain of bullets that she could not close in; she looked around in search of a method to return from certain defeat, and found a small truck parked in a lot at the corner of the car park.

"—That's it!"

Accepting the risk of being cornered with no retreat, Saber dashed for the vehicle. Berserker pursued her as she fled, shooting

at random with the firearms in his hands. Taking a ferocious step that narrowly preceded the howling bullets, Saber dashed to the back of the truck, brandished the side of her blade upward, and flung the vehicle into the air. The rain of bullets targeting Saber crumpled the truck like a paper model. Still hiding behind the truck, pieces of which had been scattered all over, Saber stopped the rotating chassis with her shoulder, and in this manner dashed toward Berserker.He continued to fire, mercilessly smashing the truck to iron chips. The heavy frame of the truck was quickly disintegrating, but it served its purpose; she was closing the distance between her and Berserker, putting him in proximity of her attack.

"Uaoaoaoao!"

The bullets, which had penetrated the structure of the truck, grazed her face and shoulders. One bullet sent sparks flying in all directions as it impacted the oil tank, combusting the fuel inside. The structure of the vehicle, already unrecognizable, was consigned to the flames. Nevertheless, even this did not stop the pace of Saber's attack.

At an opportune moment, when the distance to the adversary had closed to less than ten meters, Saber threw the wreckage of the truck at Berserker. Berserker declined to dodge the flaming iron scrap, instead raising an arm to smash it.

—The time was ripe. "Ha-a!" With a great shout, Saber once again closed in with lightning speed, driving her attack downward with all her strength. The precious sword's edge pierced the burning piece of iron, closing in on Berserker underneath. Blocked by the obstacle, Berserker could not see Saber's actions, and had

no way of avoiding this attack. In this third clash, Saber finally scored a hit on the enemy in one blow. The point of her sword transmitted the sensation of a direct hit.

But—

"—Too shallow?!"

Saber's view of the target was blocked by her shield as well. Though she had indeed scored a hit on the other by intuition, she had not been lucky enough to score a critical hit; she could not smash the skull inside.

The truck, subject to a heavy rain of bullets and pierced by a sword, finally broke into two pieces. Berserker had not received a fatal wound, but the fierce attack to his face made him stagger backward, leaving him momentarily stunned, and vulnerable to a follow-up attack. Now the scales of victory were tipped toward Saber. Kicking aside the burning vehicle wreckage, she lifted her sword in an upward stance. This time, she would definitely not let him off. Aiming for Berserker's defenseless head, she gambled her victory on the next attack.

The stance, speed, and timing were all perfect: a worthy strike from the sword-wielding Heroic Spirit, enough to decide the outcome—she was most surprised when her sword was stopped in midair.

Berserker threw away the machine guns, trapping the blade of Invisible Air between his bare hands before her eyes. He had used an impossible stance in response to Saber's killing blow, despite being unable to perceive the path of Invisible Air. He seemed to know every detail of Saber's sword, from its shape to its length, like the back of his hand. Suddenly realizing the fatal danger of

letting Berserker come into contact with her weapon, Saber shuddered violently and kicked at the black knight's chest forcefully. Berserker, who could not take the blow and was forced to retreat, released the precious sword, and Saber's beloved weapon narrowly escaped the black corrosion.

The sprinklers on the ceiling at last reacted to the flames spreading all around, violently spraying curtains of water. Subjected to the torrential pour of water, the silver and black knights nevertheless remained unmoving in confrontation.

The deceptive illusion of Invisible Air had been ineffective against Berserker. He was obviously familiar with the sword protected by an invisible sheath; he had to have known her before she became a Heroic Spirit. At the warehouse district, and at Mion River, this black knight had shown an abnormal persistence in attacking her. If his actions had not been under his Master's instructions, but this insane Heroic Spirit's own hatred . . .

The more she stared at the black fog, the more indistinct the details of the armor became. Berserker's body was entwined with a delusive protection similar to Invisible Air, making it impossible to see the true face of this Heroic Spirit. But at this point, Saber could only believe that he was undoubtedly one of the knights who had known her.

"... Your skill says you are no anonymous knight. Answer me!" Saber cried out loudly to the enemy in the mist. "Since you have recognized that I am the King of Britain, Arturia Pendragon, and challenged me as such, make known your background with glory befitting a knight! Issuing a challenge while hiding your identity is akin to plotting against me!"

The patter of water, like a heavy downpour of rain, was slowly penetrated by a clear clatter of metal. Though very slight, the sound that permeated the ears chilled her soul; under the cover of the black mist, Berserker's full-body armor was trembling.

That was the gentle sound of the armor that completely covered his limbs as the pieces rippled softly and knocked against each other.

"You . . ."

Saber finally discovered the source of the strange sound, like a sigh or a groan, crawling across the ground. That grinding, sobbing noise originated from the depths of the black helmet. Berserker's entire body shuddered, revealing an insuppressible emotion. *Laughter*—when Saber understood it thus, an unspeakable shudder ran through her body. Lacking sound logic or proof, with only her sixth sense as guidance, she realized one thing: her previous interrogation had been a fatal mistake. It was a pity that she had realized it too late. The words that would have summoned to her the worst possible curse had long since been spoken through her own lips.

The black fog painting the black knight's entire body began to swirl and contract. Within the rushing mist, the pitch-black armor finally revealed its true colors. It was perfect armor, neither exquisite nor crude, perfectly melding magnificence and functionality—the delicate, nuanced workmanship of a smith's utmost effort, which granted it an air of formidability and fine construction. The countless marks and scratches etched into it became carvings highlighting the wearer's illustrious military

exploits, adding a touch of valor to the armor. It was an ideal battle outfit that any knight could not help but envy.

Saber recognized the hero who had once rode forth on the battlefield in that armor. At the Round Table of Camelot, he had been an unrivaled swordsman, more radiant than any other; he had been a knight more excellent, and a warrior more loyal, more brave than any other.

"You are—how could—" She wished that she had seen wrongly. He was the ideal incarnation embodying the true face of a knight. That illustrious appearance could not have become the pitch-black form corroded by the Mad Enhancement curse. The black knight laughed sinisterly as if mocking Saber's thoughts, reaching for the hilt of the precious sword in its scabbard. That sword had neither been picked up nor stolen. This Heroic Spirit, hiding his name all along, was finally revealing his own Noble Phantasm. Saber could only watch on helplessly as he slowly drew the precious sword from its scabbard.

She could not have been wrong; the design of the sword was the same as that of her own, and the fairy letters carved into it were proof that it had not been forged by mortal hands. The flash of the sharp blade under the moonlight was like the water of the lake, shining with radiance. That was a limitless sword that would not be damaged regardless of the attack it had received.

Only he, one exalted as the perfect knight, was worthy of having that sword; its name was Arondight • The Indestructible Light of the Lake—that evidence spoke the bearer's name even more clearly than any verbal declaration.

"... Ar ... thur ..." The vengeful cry reverberated within the black helmet. With this one vibration, the mask that had already cracked under Saber's previous blow now shattered, and a blackened face was revealed.

Nothing remained of the beautiful visage that had once drawn the admiration of many women. Past hatred had made him as gaunt and pallid as a phantom; only his eyes still shone, filled with hatred. That was the visage of a living dead man who had lost everything to a curse.

"... Ah ..." Saber felt her knees weaken. The unyielding King of Knights forgot herself in helplessness; as if unable to bear the weight of water droplets raining upon her shoulders and back, she fell to her knees on the wet floor.

—Even those who are heroes could fall so far as to lose even the most basic sense of honor—

In the past, someone had spoken to her thus. Had the curse started then?

"... Do you really ..." Saber looked at the figure before her eyes, its past distinguished dignity long lost, now thoroughly changed by his descent into madness. Hot tears rushed forth, and she could only question.

"... Do you really hate me so much, my friend ...? Even if you have fallen this far ... Do you hate me so much, Knight of the Lake?!" In that instant, the young girl who always maintained her glory to the very end, who fought for honor to the very last, was defeated.

– 03:59:32

In the silence, a repulsive burning odor assailed his nostrils; a fire had broken out somewhere in the large edifice. Unhurried, Emiya Kiritsugu's steps were light and decisive as he slowly walked to the center of the empty porch. He moderately relaxed the muscles of his entire body, not using excessive strength in any area. His nerves reflected the entire situation of the surrounding area, like a mirror more quiet and clear than the surface of a lake sealed in ice, more sensitive than hearing, more distinct than vision, with no blind spots. He had transformed himself into a probe that could instantly sense any slight movement as he strolled through the darkness. Kotomine Kirei should be somewhere here in the Fuyuki Municipal Hall, awaiting Emiya Kiritsugu's arrival.

Considering this outcome, the ambush Kiritsugu had planned had truly been an utter failure. But he felt no regret whatsoever, now that he had finally ascertained the true colors of Kotomine Kirei, the enigmatic adversary; this was still a considerable gain. Because Kiritsugu's many predictions had come to nothing, he had gotten the answer by elimination. In summary, that man had no interest whatsoever in the Grail.

Under ordinary circumstances, all the Masters would battle for the sake of pursuing the Grail. This idea had taken root as a lasting first impression; it had blinded Kiritsugu's eyes all this time, until today. This was precisely why Kiritsugu had felt uncertainty and a lack of understanding toward Kotomine Kirei's actions—which had had nothing to do with the Grail. But tonight,

Kiritsugu had clearly seen Kirei's strategy for the Grail descension ceremony, and discovered his fundamental mistake.

Kirei's preparation of Fuyuki Municipal Hall as the sacrificial altar had been really unthorough. This fragile fortress was lacking as a magecraft stronghold, but he had not taken any defensive measures. Even if time had been pressing, he should at least have set up basic traps and protective screens. Furthermore, if there truly had been no time to prepare, why would he have summoned the other Servants forth for a decisive battle? Even if he really knew absolutely nothing about defensive magecraft, why would he choose the one leyline of the four that was most unsuitable for a defensive battle?

Kiritsugu could only believe that the descent of the Grail was of secondary importance to Kotomine Kirei. That man had picked the Fuyuki Municipal Hall solely because the chances of being ambushed there were the lowest. Rather than the Grail's successful descent, he preferred the most advantageous initiative in the final decisive battle between Masters. Kirei's goal was not the Grail, but the bloodshed involved in the process of obtaining it. The reason for that could not be investigated, nor did it need investigation. It was enough to have understood who exactly the Executor's target was.

Kiritsugu slowly gripped the Thompson Contender; feeling the touch of walnut wood under his fingers, he thought of the face he had only ever seen in a photograph. At this point, any attempts to pinpoint how and where their paths had crossed would be hollow. Kiritsugu's life had not gone so smoothly that he could assert never to have made any enemies. It was too unlikely that he could

be an outsider who had gatecrashed the Heaven's Feel solely due to a personal feud with Kiritsugu. Though there was little chance that an outsider could have lasted to the very end of the Heaven's Feel, or as directed a farce that changed the direction of progress, Kiritsugu could only accept the reality before his eyes as the truth.

Emiya Kiritsugu had never sought the truth nor answer to things. To him, only the situation had ever been worthy of concern. He had merely vowed in his heart that he would save more people. There was no distinction between the lives that were saved. The balance that measured sacrifice and salvation had nothing to do with reason or circumstance. Thus was his existence. He would certainly not be foolish enough to inquire into the significance of his actions. Therefore, nothing remained of the fear and sense of crisis he had previously felt toward Kotomine Kirei.

Initially one with clear motives in Kiritsugu's mind, that man had now fallen to become a simple obstacle hindering his progress. No matter how strong an enemy the other was, as long as Kiritsugu was sure a challenge was necessary, he would not feel anything for the opponent. There was no fear, no hatred, no underestimation nor compassion; he considered only one thing—elimination. That was the only function that Kiritsugu gave himself as a killing machine.

The large auditorium that took up the first to third floors was the key area of Fuyuki Municipal Hall. Kirei placed the corpse of the dead homunculus on the stage which, completely renovated, awaited the first performance. In its soft abdominal cavity, a foreign object could definitely be felt. The Grail, mixed in with the

organs, was now regaining its original form. Though Kirei could cut open the abdominal cavity and remove it, he was not anxious to do so. When one more Servant's soul was reclaimed, the outer covering should automatically collapse and reveal the Grail. He had only to wait. Archer was confronting Rider at the bridge; Berserker was blocking Saber at the underground parking garage. Everything was running smoothly. Now there was no one to disturb Kirei.

He left the auditorium and arrived at the corridor. Instantly, the black smoke that suffused the air assailed his nostrils. The origin of the fire should be the underground battlefield. From the density of the smell, the fire had already spread to the different areas of the structure. But all the wire connections to the outside, including the fire alarm, had already been cut off; as long as the fire did not spread outside the structure, it would not be discovered by the nearby residents. With every step he took, his mood became more passionate; the holy words of benediction could not help but spill from his lips. "He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me—"

He was here. Now he was sure to meet with him. Emiya Kiritsugu was nearby. As Kirei desired Kiritsugu's arrival, likewise did Kiritsugu search for Kirei. The flames had dispersed the darkness, flickering and dancing in various areas of the corridor. Warm air caressed Kirei's face, but he did not care. The tide of blood that roiled in his heart burned hotter than the flames. Now, Kirei felt blessed for the first time. God, who had

never before blessed him in his life, had finally given him a revelation. What he pursued was this catharsis of hatred, this joy of the fight.

"—Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life—"

The tongues of flame followed the walls up to the ceiling, becoming signposts that pointed the way to Hell, in invitation to the two men. They advanced silently, spiritedly, without hesitation, toward the place of the decisive battle. Thus, they met one level below ground, in the storage space for large props directly beneath the stage.

At the other end, roiling with black smoke, Emiya Kiritsugu saw the slender figure clothed in vestments. At the other end, roiling with hot air, Kotomine Kirei saw the black overcoat of his mortal enemy.

The radiant Black Keys in his hand reflected the gleaming magecraft gun barrel. They both perceived the killing intent; they had long come to realize that blazing sensation. There was no further need for words. Looking at each other, they came to the same conclusion at the same time.

Seven Masters. Seven Servants. All that was merely the setup.

To Emiya Kiritsugu, this war was—

To Kotomine Kirei, the entire battlefield of Fuyuki was—

Everything existed for the sake of bringing down the enemy before them. Within the raging flames, the blades were moving.

Three in his left, three in his right, the Executor pulled out a total of six Black Keys and sprinted forth.

The sight of the assassin's gun trained on the shadow that closed in with the wind.

At this moment and in this place, the curtains opened soundlessly upon the final showdown.

– 03:59:04

The earth rumbled, and clouds of sand blew as Ionioi Hetairoi approached. Even before such an overwhelming spectacle, the King of Heroes, Gilgamesh, did not budge in the slightest. The only thing dwelling in those red eyes that gazed at the magnificence was complete, sanguine joy. It was a feeling beyond the bounds of mundanity, known only to the king who had completely exhausted all the pleasures of this world. Archer was pleased. He was tired of being invited, repeatedly, till the end of time, to farces that were battles in name only. Now, he had finally met an opponent he could recognize as an enemy. A challenge from Rider was worth his full strength.

"Lashing dreams together and aspiring for tyranny . . . I praise your enthusiasm. But, brave soldiers, have any of you discerned it? The truth that a dream is something you ought to wake up from before long." Archer, with the key sword in hand, unlocked the vault from thin air. However, he did not deploy Gate of Babylon. What he took out was only a single sword.

"And thus, it was inevitable that I would be the one to block your path, King of Conquerors."

—Could it really be called something as specialized as a sword? It was a weapon with shape far too abnormal. There was a grip and a handguard, and its length was about that of a longsword. But the crucial section where the blade should have been deviated far too much from the form of an edged weapon. It was a dull blade with a tri-sectioned pillar, and a tip which spun in a spiral shape. The

three pillar sections were like querns, slowly rotating in alternation.

Yes, it was no sword; it was born before the world grasped the concept of a sword, constructed by a God preceding humans. It was the actualization of the works of a God recorded at the beginning of the world. The three quern-like cylinders, acting in concert with the movement of the Heavens, revolved as each creaked with a weight and power equivalent to tectonic movement. The enormous amount of seething and overflowing prana was beyond measurement.

"Now, know the conclusion of your unfulfilled dream. The truth shall be shown by my own hand." Archer held his hand high above his head, and the sword of the beginning gradually increased the speed of its revolutions. Faster with each rotation, ever faster . . .

Rider, who perceived the threat instinctively, pressed on Bucephalus's reins.

"It's coming!"

He yielded the first move to Archer. That was fine. It was just one blow. Ionioi Hetairoi would trample that lonely golden shadow without waiting for the next. He had to devote himself to overcoming that one blow. Archer boasted incomparable Noble Phantasms; this was unmistakably a trump card used when, in his own way, he believed the time was ripe. Was it an anti-army Noble Phantasm? An anti-fortress Noble Phantasm? Or it could be an anti-personnel Noble Phantasm, intended for Rider, the head of the army, to bring him down with certainty . . . ?

It rumbled like a tornado, and an enormous amount of prana surged forth from the grip of Archer's sword. "Now awaken, Ea. A stage befitting you has been prepared!"

Ea—the god of earth and water, of ancient Mesopotamian mythology, who had separated heaven and earth. Called by this name, the Sword of Rupture was the primordial sword present at the creation of the world in the Age of Gods. What the blade of the beginning accomplished was nothing short of the severance of what was once shapeless into heaven and earth, the giving of definition to that distinction. And now, the rotating god sword, haughtily blowing up storm winds, would once again perform that miracle of genesis. The golden King of Heroes triumphantly shouted a declaration.

"Come now and look up—to Enuma Elish!" Heaven screamed, and Earth shook. An enormous collection of prana was released, grinding at the laws of space. The sword tip Archer swung down was not aimed at anyone. What the Sword of Rupture cuts cannot be contained to any single enemy.

Rider, driving his horse hard, saw before his eyes the fracturing of the earth, and the opening of an abyss. He had observed the danger that was slowly occurring at his feet, but the momentum of the charging Bucephalus could no longer be repressed. The fate of falling could no longer be avoided; Waver stifled his scream. But of course, the horse and rider carrying him right now were not the kind to be daunted by danger of this level. Responding to Rider's reins, the heroic horse flew high into the sky with a kick of its splendid hind legs. It was a bloodcurdling leap and glide. But sure enough, at the end of that single endless

instant (to Waver), what Bucephalus landed on was firm ground on the opposite side of the fissure.

Before he had time to feel relieved, Waver paled at the horrific state of the cavalry following them. The brigade of King's Guards, not having legs as strong as Bucephalus's, could not cross the rupture in the earth, and fell helplessly into the abyss like an avalanche. The warhorses of the ranks further back braked at the very brink and were saved from the miserable fate of the fall; it was only beginning of the tragedy.

"Boy, hold on!" Reprimanding him, Rider grabbed onto Waver while clinging to Bucephalus's mane. In the time it took the heroic horse to sense the danger and jump back to a safe zone, the fissure expanded further in width, swallowing the surrounding earth and the knights. No, not only the earth; the cracks stretched out from the surface to empty air, distorting space and sucking in the atmosphere. The surroundings were blown into the end of the void by a surging wind.

"Th-this is . . ." The scene left even the King of Conquerors at a loss for words. The Sword of Rupture commanded by the King of Heroes—what its single strike bore through was not only the earth, but the world itself, stretching to the sky. One could not strategize its use, pondering if it would hit, or how much force to use. Soldiers, horses, the dust, the sky—nearly everything that used the cut space as a foundation was swallowed, disappearing into the surging void.

Bucephalus planted his hooves firm with all his strength and resisted the atmospheric pressure of the vacuum. Meanwhile, the great plain of hot sand woven by Ionioi Hetairoi cracked,

shattered, and collapsed into the abyss of the void like the end of an hourglass.

Before that blade was swung, all things were nothing more than chaos which could not form any meaning. After that one blade was swung, a new truth divided and distinguished heaven, sea, and earth. The released tumult of genesis was no longer in the realm of an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm. It was an irregularity that broke down not only that which possessed shape, but all of creation. That was the true form of the anti-world Noble Phantasm which made the King of Heroes transcendent.

Heaven fell, and earth broke; within the darkness where everything returned to nothingness, only Archer's Sword of Rupture shone with brilliance. The dazzling light continued to complete the destruction, like a star of creation, the first thing illuminating the new world.

Rider and Waver could not ascertain all of this to the end. The Reality Marble they were in was maintained by the total prana of the summoned Heroic Spirits. Before the world itself disappeared, the bounded field broke apart at the seams once over half of the army had been lost, and the distorted laws of space once again returned to their original state. And so, as though awakening from a dream, Bucephalus, carrying the two of them, landed on the great bridge of night-time Fuyuki.

On the opposite bridgehead, the golden Archer stood, blocking their path with a bewitching smile. The location of the two did not change; it was as though time had rewinded back to the outset of the battle. The only change that could be seen was the existence of the Sword of Rupture in Archer's hand, still twisting and

growling. The fatal change that could not be seen was the loss of Ionioi Hetairoi, Rider's trump card.

"Rider . . ."

The giant Servant, with a serious and dignified face, posed a question to his Master, looking up to him with a pallid expression. "Come to think of it, there's one thing that I have to ask you."

". . . Huh?"

"Waver Velvet. Would you be a servant, and serve me?"

His entire body shook with violent emotions, and a flood of tears poured like the bursting of a dam. It was a question that he knew would always be out of his reach, and yet one he had been yearning and anxiously waiting for. There was no need to search for a reply; he had already prepared one, hidden deep in his heart like a treasure.

"You—" The boy, called by his name for the first time, threw out his chest without wiping away his tears, and replied with a steady voice. "—You, are my King. I will serve you. I will give my all for you. Please, guide me, let me see the same dream."

The king of tyranny smiled at the words of oath. To his servant, that smile was a reward surpassing any prize. "Hm, very well."

As soon as his heart was enveloped in uplifting joy, Waver's body was truly lifted into space.

". . . Huh?"

The king picked up the boy's short body from the back of Bucephalus and gently lowered him onto the surface of the asphalt

road. Returned to the vision of his original height, Waver was bewildered at his shortness and smallness.

"It is my duty as the king to exemplify the dream. It is your duty as the servant to ascertain the dream of the King, and pass it down to later generations." Upon a saddle so high Waver's shaking hand could never reach it, the King of Conquerors smiled firmly but brightly as he passed down his royal command. "Live on, Waver. See everything through to the end, live long, and tell it; the nature of your king; the sprint of this Alexander."

Bucephalus neighed, beating his hooves as though in encouragement, but in the end, was it for the king who would now face his death, or the servant who was entrusted with a difficult charge? Waver hung his head and did not raise it. Alexander took that as consent. No words were needed. The servant would be guided by the figure of the king, loyal to that memory. With this oath, even separation was meaningless; under Alexander's command, the bond formed between king and servant was eternal and beyond time.

"Now, Bucephalus, to conquest!" The King of Conquerors kicked the flanks of his beloved horse, and sped off to face his last sprint. Aiming for the bitter enemy waiting for him, he let out a screaming war cry. He was a strategist, and fully acknowledged the indisputable flow of battle. But they were fundamentally different. The King of Conquerors Alexander knew no way other than charging toward the golden Heroic Spirit. There was no resignation or despair, only utter excitement bursting from his heart.

He was *strong*—too strong. The hero who tore apart the world itself was undoubtedly the strongest enemy in heaven and earth. This man was his last enemy. He was higher than the peak of the Hindu Kush, hotter than the hot sands of the Mackran; he was the last obstacle in the world. How could he not challenge it? If he could surpass this, what lay beyond was surely the ends of the world. The faraway dream he had always been seeing was waiting to be fulfilled right now, before his eyes. "To Philotimo"—he challenged it because it was unreachable; he expressed his tyranny, exemplified it, for the sake of the servant who watched over his back.

The King of Heroes, towering over his path, calmly gazed at the challenger, and released the treasures of the vault. Twenty, forty, eighty—a swarm of Noble Phantasms were deployed from thin air, shining like glittering stars, reminiscent of the starry sky of the East far off in the distance that Alexander looked up to.

"Aaaalalalalaie!"

Bellowing with a delight that shook his heart, he rushed on together with his beloved horse. With haughty growls, the rain of stars approached. Incessantly, mercilessly, the impacts trampled over their bodies. However, that pain was mere trifle compared to the excitement of this sprint.

There were times when he had succumbed to faint-heartedness even before he reached the furthest end. How foolish; what a disgrace! The end he had been seeking now towered over his path. Having crossed countless hills and forded countless rivers, he had finally discovered it.

Thus, he would surpass it. He would step across that enemy. One step, and one step further. The only thing he had to do was simply repeat that. Step by step, even that distant figure would surely be reached by his blade. The swarm of stars continued to stream boisterously. In his fury, where even his consciousness was prone to recede, his posture inadvertently and carelessly began to decline. Then he realized that he had started running on his own feet. How far did his beloved horse Bucephalus go? Where did he end? He would mourn for his friend, who had boldly carried out his duty to the end; he could not stop now. Each step forward was a mourning for the departed.

His golden rival, understanding this, said something with an expression of amazement. But he could not hear him. Not even the flashes of light grazing past his ears, with the sounds of violent winds, could reach those ears.

What he heard was simply the sound of the waves, breaking onto remote empty shores of the sea at the world's end. Aah, that was it. With a bright feeling, he understood it. How had he not recognized it during all this time? This violent throbbing of his heart was the roaring of Oceanus.

"Hahah . . . ahahahaha!"

He saw his dream as he ran on the beach. The sensation of the sprays he kicked up felt pleasant on his toes. The bright red soaking his feet might be the blood flowing from his own abdomen, but what of it? Right now, he was watching a dream of the sea. How could there be any greater bliss?

The King of Heroes awaited him, right before his very eyes. One more step—and then just one more, and his sword, brandished high, could cleave apart the crown of his head.

"Ha—h!" With a ringing victory cry that reached the Heavens, he swung the sword of the Cypriots. It was the peak of a moment when he was convinced of his victory. The instant that should have passed in the blink of an eye seemed, for some reason, to stretch into an eternity; time stood still.

No, time had not stopped—his body had. Before the sword could reach, his blade, his limbs, his shoulders, and his abdomen were wrapped by a tough chain; the King of Conquerors sighed.

Enkidu—the secret among secrets contained in the King of Heroes' vault was a restraint that captured even the Bull of Heaven.

"Good grief . . . All these oddities, one after another . . ." There was no wonder or regret. He simply derided himself for finally tripping over a small careless mistake. A bitter smile rose from his bloodstained lips. The sword of the Cypriots had not reached him; instead, Gilgamesh's Sword of Rupture pierced through Alexander's chest with its dull tip. He could feel the sensation of the slowly grinding blade inside his vitals. This sword just becomes more and more absurd—the King of Conquerors felt amazement as well as admiration, as though this were no concern of his.

"—Have you awoken from your dream, King of Conquerors?"

". . . Hm, yes. I suppose . . ." It could not be carried out this time either. It had ended with the dream remaining unfulfilled. However, that was a one-time dream he had wagered his life for in

the past anyway. The fantastic dream he saw in Asia Minor in the remote past—now, in this Far East land, he was once again seeing the same dream. Thinking nostalgically on such checkered circumstances, Alexander smiled. If he could see the same dream for even a second time, it would not be strange to have a third. Which would mean—

It was nearly the right time to see the next dream. "This expedition has, been … exciting, in all respects as well …" Alexander murmured in satisfaction, narrowing the corners of his eyes blurred by a blood haze. Ascertaining his expression of rapture, Gilgamesh solemnly nodded.

"You may challenge it as many times you wish, King of Conquerors." To his worthy opponent, unstopped though skewered from head to toe by the rain of Noble Phantasms, until finally thwarted by the Chain of Heaven, the King of Heroes gave his greatest reward—he honored him with true feelings of admiration. "Until the end of time, this world will always be my garden. Thus, I can assure you—you shall never find this world tiresome."

"Ooh …? That's, good to, hear …" In the end, with a carelessly appropriate reply, Rider was quietly extinguished.

It was a short battle, nothing more than offense and defense that barely filled the few seconds it took for the mounted Heroic Spirit to gallop across to the opposite bridgehead. But it was a lifetime to Waver, who had it burned into his unblinking eyes. He would never forget it. Even if a lid were closed over his heart, he could not possibly forget. The scene caught in his eyes in those last few seconds were now a part of his soul, impossible to detach.

He simply stood rooted to the ground, alone, left behind on the road, unable to move at all. He had to move, but if he tried to walk a single step he would collapse onto his knees—and he absolutely must not kneel down now.

The golden Archer, gazing at Waver with his brutal blood-colored eyes, slowly walked up to him. He must not avert his eyes. His entire body was frozen with terror, but he understood that one thing. He would not survive if he averted his eyes now; shaking with unconcealed fear, he stubbornly refused to avert his eyes. Archer, standing before him, posed a question in a voice completely devoid of emotion.

"Boy, are you Rider's Master?"

He had thought it impossible to speak with a throat frozen by terror, but at this question he was released from his stiffness for a short moment. Waver shook his head, and replied in a hoarse voice. "No. I'm—his servant."

"Hmn?" Archer narrowed his eyes, looking Waver over in his entirety, and finally noticed the absence of the Command Seals. "—I see. But, boy, if you truly are a loyal subject, you have a duty to take revenge for your deceased King, do you not?"

Even with the second question, Waver answered with a strangely calm heart. ". . . If I challenge you, I would die."

"Of course."

"I can't do that. I was ordered to live." Yes, he could not die. Not now, when the last words entrusted to him by the King were engraved into his heart. Waver must escape from this dilemma at any cost. He was before an enemy Servant with no way to defend himself. Though it was a desperate, helpless situation, the one

thing he definitely could not do was give up. He could not ignore the way he had made the oath. And that was perhaps a pain far more cruel than resigning himself to death.

The boy shook helplessly before the death he could not escape from, but his gaze alone made his adamancy known. Looking down wordlessly on that diminutive stature for a short while, Gilgamesh simply nodded once. "The path of devotion is a great labor. Never mar it." He had no reason to raise his hand against a mongrel who was neither Master nor traitor. That was his decision as the king.

Waver watched as the golden Heroic Spirit turned on his heels and calmly walked away. Before long, the figure was gone from his sight, and a cold wind blowing across the river dispersed the air of battle. The lone boy then realized he had been left behind in the night, and finally understood that everything had ended. His knees shook again at the miracle of his survival.

Before Archer changed his mind, he had truly intended to kill Waver; he sensed it from the killing intent he released. Had Waver averted his eyes, collapsed with fear, or choked in his reply, it would certainly have happened. One who sneers at his manner of begging for his life simply did not know the remorselessness of the King of Heroes. Being alive after resisting his terror was a conflict, and a victory. It was the first time Waver Velvet had gained a victory in a challenge by himself. It was an unsightly and very small battle. It was far from brave, or spectacular. No one yielded to him, and he plundered nothing. The only thing he did was survive and escape from a dilemma.

Even so, Waver was happy. He was proud. Only Waver himself understood how priceless it was to arrive at that impossible conclusion under those circumstances. That honor was his only. Even if it appeared unsightly to an onlooker, there was no reason to feel ashamed. He had complied with the order of the King, seen everything to the end, and lived on. He wanted to be praised by that massive, heavy palm, by that rough, unreserved, and thick voice. This time, he would not need to hide his embarrassment. He could have thrown out his chest unreservedly and boasted about his accomplishments to the man.

Yet, in this night sunken in silence, Waver was helplessly alone. No one was beside him. Like his self eleven days ago, Waver was alone, left behind in a heartless and apathetic corner of the world. The battle was his alone. No one had noticed what he had surpassed by himself in his loneliness. No one was praising him.

But cruel it was not. He had been rewarded with more than enough praise just then. The grandest King in the world had recognized and assigned him. He was told that he would be added to the ranks of the servants. The order of events was simply reversed; he had now been praised for the distant future to come. The only thing to do now was to devote his remaining life to accumulate accomplishments worthy of that eulogy.

Yes—because of those words said back then, he was not alone. The moment he understood this, his days as a boy were over. And then he knew it for the first time; sometimes, tears flowed freely out of humiliation or regret. Now, on the empty bridge, looking down on the black surface of the flowing river, Waver Velvet wet

his cheeks without any regrets. They were the warm and crisp tears of a man.

– 03:55:01

—A woman was crying. Day by day, her beautiful countenance grew increasing ragged with sorrow, and wrinkles of dilemma were etched into the ends of her brows; the woman was silently crying.

She blamed and questioned herself. She was ashamed beyond measure. As a sinner who shouldered all the guilt and blame in the world, she could only wet her face day after day with her tears. Everyone spoke wicked words of her—an unchaste wife, a traitorous queen. Those foolish plebians blinded by the glorious myths did not know the truth, but only surrounded her and reprimanded her all at once.

They did not even know that her husband was not a man.

In this world, only her noble visage could make him reveal his true heart. However, all he could recall were her frustrated and sorrowful tears. Yes, 'he' had hurt her.

Loved her—

Was loved by her—

That was the root of their fall.

Even she must have had discarded everything back then, and consigned herself. An ideal king was needed to save the country ravaged by chaos and war, and a noble and virtuous queen was needed beside the king. That was how the monarch was supposed to be in the dreams of the populace.

A woman's life was so insignificant compared to this grandiose ideal. Even if the king was not a man, even if this marriage was between two women—one of them concealing her gender—and could never be consummated, this sacrifice was necessary to protect the country and its greater good.

Even so, he still wanted to save her. The first time 'he' had been granted audience in the court, he had sworn silently in his heart that he would do anything for this woman, and would even give up his life for her. It had been too late when she discovered that it was this thought of his that had been tormenting her.

She had fallen hopelessly in love with him. She had already discarded the happiness of a woman. Love was the greatest taboo.

Even if this romance was impermissible, there should still have been a path for them to make their difficult resolution, shoulder their sins, and continue till the end. What man would not fight against the entire world for the woman he loved?

However, he could not do that. She was not a woman, nor was she a human, but a mechanical part, a queen, that supported the king ruling the world. He was not a man, nor was he a human, but a mechanical part, a knight, that served the king with absolute loyalty.

He was the man called the Knight of the Lake—incomparably brave, courteous and chivalrous, elegant and flamboyant at the same time. He was indeed the personification of the essence of chivalry, an existence that all admired. Not only was this ideal knight worshipped by all, he had even been blessed by the fairies. This title was his ultimate glory, and at the same time the greatest

curse bestowed upon him. The perfect knight who served the perfect king—this was the only way he could live, as others had expected and trusted him to, and so he gave up his life for it.

His life did not belong to himself, but to the people who honored chivalry and gave their lives for it. And the king that he served was truly too perfect; an absolutely flawless hero. The Knight of the Lake could never harbor any thought of betrayal toward this King of Knights who had saved his home country from the depths of war.

He swore his absolute loyalty to the perfect monarch, and sealed a noble friendship with him, knowing that behind this noble chivalry, a tormented, neglected woman wept by day.

Which path had been the correct one? No one could tell now. Should he have been cruel till the end and stayed true to his ideals, or should he have discarded loyalty and lived for love? Time passed mercilessly by while his heart twisted in agony. Finally, the worst outcome greeted him.

Villainous fellows had shattered the king's prestige, and the betrayal of the queen was finally revealed to the world. To save the queen, who had been sentenced to death, he could only go against his king in arms—and thus, he lost everything. A knight turned traitor, his disloyalty broke the balance within the Knights of the Round Table. Finally, this incident became the trigger of war and carnage, and the country fell to pieces in the flames of war.

Men had often called him in tones of mockery. That stained name was carved deeply in the history of the past and would never be washed clean. She fell into deep self-deprecation for having misguided that perfect knight, and cried to this day. In the end, the only thing he had done for the woman he loved—was to make her cry forevermore.

Had he been born as a sordid man without honor, he mighthave taken away the queen without a moment's hesitation and destroyed the king's prestige. But he was a knight, an overly perfect knight. For the king, his rival in love, for the one who caused the woman he loved to step onto that painful and difficult road—he had never had any feelings of hatred till the end.

Yes, who could possibly defame that famous king? That king, whose glorious name was passed down through the eons, was more courageous and noble than anyone else. That king had ended that troubled time. That king, who had never lost a battle, was uncorrupted and just, honorable but never affected by personal emotions, and had never made a mistake in life.

After all, that king had never blamed him throughout his life. Even when the king exchanged blows with him, who had been discarded by the Round Table, it had been a helpless act to make an example out of him with the country as their witness, and never the king's original intention. For him, who had committed the greatest sin of betrayal, the king had always treated him with a pure and noble friendship even to the very end.

That noble king was so *correct*. How could anyone hate or despise that monarch? On whom should his regret and her tears be burdened?

The hatred he brought to the grave was extracted at the end of time's long passage, and tormented him for an eternity on the Throne of Heroes that had no end . . . And then he finally heard the call from afar. *Come, mad beast. Come, stubborn vengeful spirit.* That sound from the end of time had called. That sound woke his long-held wish.

Had he not been a knight, had he been a beast knowing no honor and no reason, had he been a demon fallen into the league of beasts, perhaps he could have avenged this hatred and regret. Yes, madness was the road to salvation. A beast would not be lost, would not feel pain. No one expected anything of it, no one entrusted anything to it. If he could become a beast and direct the movement of his limbs with nothing but his own desire . . . this wish became the connection that linked him with the end of time, and placed him on this battlefield that he cared not for and knew nothing about.

He had forgotten his name and his disciplined vow long ago. His body only existed to perform the murderous skills that his hands had long been steeped in. The pride that felt shame in this no longer existed, and the heart that regretted was lost as well. This was who he currently was—the existence called Berserker. There was no regret; to fall, to be freed, was what he had sought. Moreover, the merciless hand of Fate had even arranged such an ironic rendezvous.

"... Ar ... thur ..." The call that slipped out of his lips no longer meant anything.

Even so, this silver swordsman who now knelt in the torrential rain was undoubtedly that person whom he had both loved and

hated in the past. That noble visage and that majestic and solemn face, upon which innumerable hopes and blessings had been bestowed, was now kneeling in front of despair. Now the king knew the truth that had been hidden for so long, knew of the hatred that had been buried in eternal darkness. The king forgot the pride of a monarch and mourned.

—Do you hate me so much, my friend?—

Yes, that's what I wanted to see!—the beast in his heart cried, the knight in his heart sobbed. *Savor it well. Now you know how many tears we have shed for your transient glory, how we have annihilated ourselves, wasted our days, and sat in emptiness waiting for old age.*

Now was the time when his buried injustice would be revenged. The fallen black knight lifted his sword of vengeance up high.

—Do you hate me so much, Knight of the Lake?!—

Ah. Yes, that is right. At the time, had I not been a knight, but only lived as a man . . . Had I not been a loyal subject, but hated you as a human . . . Perhaps, I could have saved that woman!

– 03:54:28

The analysis of Kotomine Kirei's battle tactics was based on information from Hisau Maiya, who had fought him twice. He threw Black Keys for ranged battle. A single throw, together with preparatory movements, could be completed in 0.3 seconds. It had been confirmed that he could complete four throws in 0.7 seconds. He could also attack unconfirmed targets if unobstructed. The power of the blades, half-spiritual entities, could penetrate iron. Chances of a hit—100% if he used illusions. He employed Baji Quan for melee fighting. Although the details were unclear, he was indeed at the level of an expert. He had seriously injured Maiya, who had a dagger, with just one blow. The destructive power of this kind of attack can snap a tree with two blows, and was extraordinarily dangerous. The frock covering his entire body had been reinforced with bullet-proof material, and processed to protect against spells. It could defend against the impact and penetration power of 9mm Parabellum bullets.

As for pre-battle intelligence gathered from other fields—according to the magecraft teaching result report obtained from Tousaka Tokiomi, Kotomine Kirei's level of magecraft learning had not progressed beyond the degree of a beginner. His most outstanding skill was simply spiritual healing. If he were to use any effective measures during battle, the only predictable one would be physical enhancement, his most adept skill, used to exert even greater physical strength.

Lastly, his battle tactics. Since Emiya Kiritsugu had thoroughly hid himself, the most Kotomine Kirei could use to analyze Kiritsugu's tactics were rumors. The only battle in this Heaven's Feel that forced Kiritsugu to use his ace was the fight against Lord El-Melloi. The bounded field of the Einsbern Castle at that time was still dense enough to prevent the Assassins from penetrating. Moreover, Kirei himself was tied down in the battle with Maiya and Irisivel during that time. In conclusion, it was impossible for Kirei to know about Innate Time Control and the Origin Bullet. He would likely not have countermeasures for these.

—That was all the information that Emiya Kiritsugu had gathered for the final decisive battle.

The initial wave of attacks were Black Keys versus bullets. Kirei was overwhelmingly disadvantaged, but by relying on magecraft to compensate for his lack of weaponry, he was able to rush up fearlessly and close the distance between them. At last, the Executor waved the wing-like six Black Keys and rushed toward Kiritsugu from the front. It seemed that he had made the defensive preparations for Kiritsugu's bullets.

It was exactly what Kiritsugu had wanted. He could ensure the success of his killing blow precisely because of Kirei's defensive measure; he was firing the magecraft bullet from his Mystic Code.

With the belief that the early bird gets the worm, Kiritsugu fired at his opponent. Kirei should have been able to completely predict the trajectory of the bullet from Kiritsugu's killing aura and preparatory actions. As a humanoid Shura, an Executor of the Holy Church, the quickness of Kirei's mind far surpassed that of a bullet.

Kirei initiated a large scale magecraft.

The Black Keys that he grasped with both hands instantly swelled up into more than twice their original size. The half-spiritual blades, woven by magecraft, had extra prana instilled into them and were completely strengthened. Although the forceful execution of this spell evidently surpassed the weapons' limits, it was enough to handle one bullet. Kirei crossed the six enormous swords before his chest and held them in fan-like formation. The mighty destructive power of the .30–06 Springfield assault rifle bullet was completely shut out in an instant, deflected away together with flying sparks. The Black Keys, filled with too much prana, shattered completely, unable to handle the heavy impact.

This extraordinary move, which allowed swords to surpass bullets, now became a mistake. It was truly shocking that Kirei, who should not even have a Magic Crest, could execute such a surprising skill. But more importantly, this would allow the fatal destruction of Kirei's Magic Circuits, which were currently serving as a sack of energy. Due to Emiya Kiritsugu's repulsion of the Origin, Kirei's flesh would instantly be annihilated due to the magecraft running rampant in his body—that was what was supposed to happen.

A rapidly approaching figure clad in black frock suddenly appeared within the scattering fragments of the six Black Keys. Kiritsugu gasped in surprise. "Time alter—double accel!" His body reacted sooner than his brain while he remained in shock. Kiritsugu chanted a spell, and jumped backward at the last moment. Kirei's right foot ferociously swept past the tip of Kiritsugu's nose, and the left foot that followed failed to land on

Kiritsugu's neck. Kirei's smooth roundhouse kicking attack completely missed its target under the confusion caused by Kiritsugu's double-speed movement.

That was not within the scope of his predictions. The Origin Bullet fired from his magecraft Contender gun was nullified—Kiritsugu could not figure out the reason for this. Meanwhile, Kirei did not understand the reason for Kiritsugu's surprise, he was unaware that the uniqueness of his magecraft had surprisingly nullified Kiritsugu's killing blow.

Kirei had never been an orthodox magus. His Magic Circuits had yet to be developed properly, and he only obtained a source of prana through utilizing the spare Command Seals he received from Risei so he could instantly learn how to use magecraft. Although the characteristics of the Command Seals meant they were disposables which would disappear upon use, it had managed to save Kirei at the end. The moment the magecraft was activated and the Origin Bullet made contact, the Command Seal that served as the source of prana had simply disappeared from Kirei's arm.

His one-hit-kill plan disrupted, Kiritsugu could only move on to his next step. He did not expect the opponent to attack back. Though Kirei's attacks were only a waste of effort, the overwhelming destructive power of his martial arts was evident. This man is a high-level martial artist, and Kiritsugu would had no chance of victory if he was pulled into a melee battle.

Ignoring the damage from Innate Time Control's side effects, Kiritsugu maintained its activation and escaped Kirei's range at once. He first had to increase the distance between them, or he

would stand no chance. Kiritsugu would be able to deal with Kirei if the other simply threw Black Keys, but the current competition had become an authentic contest of distance. Kiritsugu was retreating, while Kirei was advancing. Since the ideal distance for them to initiate an attack differed between the two men, they could only compete with their speed on foot.

The power of mobility that Innate Time Control gave to him was Kiritsugu's most reliable defence; he needed to keep some distance to load the Contender bullets. If he stayed out of melee range, but close enough for the bullet's path to be unpredictable, he would surely be able to finish the enemy this time. Even without magecraft in the bullet, the bulletproof vest that the enemy wore—as mentioned in Maiya's report—would not be able to stop the penetrating power of these hunting bullets which could kill even large beasts in one shot. Though he understood that the continuous activation of Innate Time Control was nothing short of suicide, he had no other choice. However, Kiritsugu had still underestimated Kotomine Kirei.

It was not Kiritsugu's incredible speed or a miscalculation that caused Kirei's roundhouse kick to go off the mark; Kiritsugu's movement was not so nimble that Kirei was completely unable to grasp it. Once Kirei understood that Kiritsugu was only moving at twice a normal human's speed, he had calculated the appropriate compensations to make. Kiritsugu would be surprised a second time.

There were more than five paces between them. The tall Executor took a slight step forward and shortened this seemingly safe distance. This step, a sneak along the ground toward the

enemy without announcing its speed, was called the moving stance. It was also one of the dangerous secret skills of Baji Quan.

The tall, frock-clad figure slid like the Reaper before Kiritsugu, who felt a cold shiver. Baji Quan could exert its greatest power at this distance. Kirei's fist smashed down heavily toward the enemy with the power to reach infinity in all eight directions . . .

Kirei stepped forward. The concrete floor boomed under the impact, and the heavily planted forward fist smashed against Kiritsugu's chest like a rock. Using the Eight Postures of the Buddha Guards style, Kirei's single blow had the power of a grenade exploding point-blank. Kiritsusu's body, taking the full force of the blow, flew into the air like a strand of hay and slammed into the support pillars crowding the room; he never had the chance to defend himself. His thoracic cavity tore apart under the heavy blow of Kirei's iron fist, and his lungs and heart were pounded into nothing more than a mesh of meat.

Still clutching his fist, Kirei felt the sensation of death on his hand and sighed slowly. Even in a time-critical fight to the death, one moment was all it took to decide the victor; the victory brought an emptiness he had never felt before—this was the end he had pursued with such crazed fervor. Lethargy dulled Kirei's focus, and he did not expect the opponent's sneak attack at this moment, nor did he realize he would be the next target of surprise.

There was a piercing pain between his brows, and a splash of red covered his field of sight. The sound of gunfire beside his ears made Kirei instinctively raise his arms to shield his head before he understood what was going on. A rain of 9mm bullets showered

him mercilessly. The sleeves, made of Kevlar and covered in protective sigils, barely held the force of the bullets. Kirei was stunned.

Kiritsugu himself had not expected to be revived. He had been prepared to die when Kirei neared him. In truth, Kiritsugu's heart and lungs had indeed been completely destroyed, and the best he could manage should have been a final struggle. However, seconds before his blood-deprived brain died from deoxygenation, the heavy and uncontrollable injury on his body had healed completely by itself. He immediately understood its cause—the Noble Phantasm, Avalon. When he parted with his wife, he had received this sword sheath possessing a mighty healing power which could prevent aging. Sealed inside Kiritsugu, Saber's authentic Master, it now obtained prana from Saber and exerted its full effect in accordance with the contract.

Though Kiritsugu understood its ability, he had never confirmed it with his own eyes, and thus did not expect it to be able to heal fatal injuries. Admirably, he began to consider battle tactics as soon as he realized this. Without opening his eyes, he suppressed the urge to cough as his body began to breathe again, feigning death while awaiting the chance to launch a surprise attack.

Unfortunately, the Contender in his right hand still needed a bullet in the chamber. The only way to catch Kirei unaware was to fire the short automatic machine gun holstered on his chest with his left hand. But Kirei had near-perfect defense against bullets; he would have to aim at the head. It was an awkward angle, and he would have to fire by instinct. Despite these obstacles, the master

shooter managed a hit—but it did not penetrate Kirei's skull, only scraped the skin on his brow.

Kiritsugu quickly siwtched the machine gun into full automatic mode and sealed Kirei's movements with a tight wall of suppressive fire, simultaneously ejecting the empty shell in the Contender's barrel with his right. Though it was hard to control the submachine gun's untamed recoil with only his left hand, his right hand nonetheless executed the movements fluently like a war machine. With both hands thus engaged, he chanted a spell with superhuman concentration. "Time alter——double accel!"

Time changed within his body as Kiritsugu threw it all to the wind to make the most of this opportunity. Driving his accelerated limbs, he leapt back to increase the distance between them. The machine gun emptied its clip; Kiritsugu adjusted his pose, tossed the machine gun and grabbed a .30–06 bullet with the now-empty hand. Kirei loomed just ahead; with incredible speed, Kiritsugu loaded the Contender's open barrel, snapped the barrel halfway, and took aim—three paces from Kirei's iron fists, the Contender once again released its furious roar, offering no time to dodge or counterattack.

Kirei had never intended to dodge. Once again, he activated his Command Seals and strengthened his physical abilities—his reaction time was shortened, and his right arm muscles were greatly strengthened. There was no time to reinforce the sleeve of the bulletproof frock; the rest was up to his skill now. Before the Contender could fire, Kirei carved a spiral in the air with his right arm, now transformed into a lethal Mystic Code, and a tornado roared into being. Originally a defensive skill to nullify an

opponent's fists, the movement became a spiralling force when performed at extraordinary speed empowered by the prana of two Command Seals.

The bullet, leaving the barrel at 2,500 inches per second, was wrapped in the spiral moving at divine speed. The .30–06 bullet still maintained a straight path, tearing the Kevlar sleeves and clashing viciously with Kirei's hardened arm, emitting foreign sounds like the clash of two mill stones. 3,000PSI of pressure bent its knees at the power of prana; Kiritsugu felt a chill up his spine as he watched the second Contender bullet fly off, its trajectory forcibly changed.

Demon—he had no other words to describe this man. Kotomine Kirei's battle prowess was like a desperate man's. What kind of a willpower could forge a living man's own body into such a terrifying lethal weapon? A piercing pain invaded his entire body, and Kiritsugu stumbled with a moan; the effects of Innate Time Control had brought his body to its limit. Blood vessels all over his body had ruptured, and the bones in his limbs were beginning to fracture from the unimaginable burden. But Kirei did not follow up during this pause. He remained where he stood, as if observing the opponent's next move. Blood gushed from his right arm where the frock sleeve was torn; he had used too much prana with his unskilled method. His right arm, overly strengthened by magecraft, was severely wounded—the price for blocking the Contender's blow. The two men kept their disdainful eyes on each other, analyzing the situation as they each pondered their next move.

According to Kirei's analysis, Kiritsugu's strategy consisted of a magecraft that could accelerate his movement, and a healing power that could revive the caster even if the heart was destroyed. He could not win no matter how heavy a wound he dealt to the enemy, unless he could destroy Kiritsugu's brain with one blow. His right arm had been damaged from muscle to bone, and he could only manage one more blow even if he was prepared to shatter his entire right fist. The wound on his forehead was not deep, but the bleeding affected sight in his left eye. The frock's bulletproof ability had greatly diminished from multiple shots, and only the protective sigils close to his body remained intact. He had twelve Black Keys and eight Command Seals left.

According to Kiritsugu's analysis, Kirei's strategy consisted of an unknown prana source which could nullify his Origin Bullet, as well as his ultimate Baji Quan skills. Melee fighting would be extremely disadvantageous for him. He had lost his submachine gun, and the Contender needed reloading. His remaining weapons consisted of one dagger and two grenades. The heavy wound on his chest had healed and would not affect his movements, but he could not say the same for the damage caused by Innate Time Control . . .

Tightening the muscles on his arms and legs, Kiritsugu found that he could move them without difficulty. The snapped bones were now in perfect condition, seemingly never damaged in the first place—no, he could still feel the echo of that pain, but the injuries were healed. He finally understood the true worth of this trump card in his body. Avalon not only healed injuries dealt by his enemies, but also those dealt by himself. Though he was in a

desperate situation against an unimaginably strong enemy, he now felt great confidence.

"Time alter—triple accel!" Kiritsugu boldly leapt toward Kirei as he chanted. His unpredictable acceleration caught Kirei off guard. One blow from the hardened walnut wood smashed the radius and ulna of Kirei's right arm, ruining it. However great a threat Kirei's martial arts were, victory would be his if he kept moving at thrice ordinary human speed. The protection of Avalon allowed him to use Innate Time Control this way; it would ordinarily be suicide.

He drew the dagger at his waist with his left hand, but Kirei dodged the upward stab and blocked the downward slash and backhand swing with his left arm. However, Kiritsugu edged toward Kirei's left side using these three attacks and prepared to attack Kirei's blind spot—caused by his left eye's ruined vision—to his advantage. His sharp blade crept nearer, but Kirei did not turn in response, blocking everything with the left side of the body. Turning would have been pointless; his broken right arm could not possibly block Kiritsugu's dagger.

The dagger attacked continuously as it flashed chillingly. Kiritsugu's movements were imperceptible with ordinary vision, which would only have seen the lighting-like residual images. Nonetheless, Kirei blocked every attack with his left hand, even ones he could not possibly have seen, which terrified Kiritsugu.

"Could this be the idea of—hearing a move?" Kiritsugu had only a vague impression of this phrase. It was said that a martial artist, having attained a certain level in his skills, could predict the opponent's next move in the brief moment his arm touched his

opponent's. The attacks from his blind spot were thus nullified. This man's skills kept him out of disadvantage even under the duress of speed.

Kiritsugu's arms, legs, and heart screamed in excruciating pain with every swing of the dagger. The adverse effects of Innate Time Control were mercilessly tearing Kiritsugu's flesh. Though Avalon was simultaneously fixing the damage, the excruciating pain of torn tendons and snapped bones tormented Kiritsugu's nerves constantly. Even so, he had no need to hesitate, and did not do so. As long as his body was still functional, he paid no heed to what he was feeling. Kiritsugu bet everything on the effect of the holy sword's sheath and continued to accelerate his time flow like his life depended on it.

"Whoa—!"

Kiritsugu's body was being reborn as it was dying; he shrieked with agony as he swung his dagger, aiming for the enemy before him. His blood vessels, endlessly rupturing and repairing, shed sanguineous mists with every move.

Kirei suddenly shifted his stance and rolled to his left, hooking Kiritsugu's right foot with his feet and stumbling the surprised Kiritsugu. This legwork was called the locking stance. Finally balancing himself, he realized a heavy blow from Kirei was fast approaching, yet his weight had shifted backwards; he would definitely be hit. He squeezed out a spell from his throat, frothing with blood.

"Time alter—square accel!"

Explosive pain boiled into every part of his senses. Kiritsugu leapt backward and turned in mid-air, escaping Kirei's range of

attack, and at the same time threw the dagger in his left hand with all the strength in his body. Despite his move-hearing skills, Kirei could not dodge such speed. The dagger tore through air, stabbing through Kevlar fibres and stabbing deep into Kirei's thigh. Kiritsugu maintained his fourfold acceleration and continued to leap backward on full throttle, moving about ten meters away in the blink of an eye. Kirei took the opportunity to throw a Black Key, but Kiritsugu dodged it with ease and began to reload the Contender.

As he pulled it and opened the barrel, Kirei rushed up, paying no attention to the dagger in his left leg, which tore the wound wider as he ran. The expelled cartridge danced in the air, sparkling golden bronze. Kirei pulled out four Black Keys with his left hand, as many as he could wield single-handedly. Kiritsugu loaded the new bullet into the barrel; it slid in easily, but in fourfold-accelerated time took an eternity to move into place. Kirei threw his Black Keys, not to the front, but upward, where the four sharp blades danced beneath the tall ceiling of the large prop warehouse like boomerangs. Kirei was not planning on a normal attack, but Kiritsugu did not know his intentions, nor had he time to ponder Kirei's intention at this moment.

The gun barrel closed with an upward flick, and the Contender was once again a heinous murder weapon. Kirei was closing in, using his martial art stances to shorten the distance—but he would not be getting any closer. Kiritsugu would definitely be able to dodge him and fire at the same time—

The Black Keys landed from above him, surrounding him like a bird cage, and at that moment Kiritsugu finally perceived Kirei's

tactics: he intended to seal his movements. The sharp black blades awaited him no matter where he dodged. The only way to stay alive was to fire before he was attacked.

Kiritsugu aimed with Contender. There was no need to be anxious, no need to be fearful. All he had to do was focus on firing at the enemy in front of him. Kirei stepped on the ground viciously with his right foot and leapt forward, covering about five paces. His left foot would likely break the moment he landed, but the following blow would decide the victor, and there was no need to hold back; his entire body had been fully prepared. he would perform one of the Eight Grand Openings, The Standing Upward Cannon. Its smashing upper hook would shatter the opponent's skull into pieces.

I will win—both men believed firmly. *I will die*—both men understood. The fist and the gun, containing the will for a sure kill, finally completed their last exchange.

Emiya Kiritsugu and Kotomine Kirei, deeply engrossed in battle, did not notice the abnormality taking place above them. Directly above the big prop warehouse where the two men were, Irisviel's already-cold corpse was placed upon the raised stage of the music hall. Almost all signs of life had ceased within her. The organs within her body had already reverted to the form of the Vessel of the Grail, and waited to collect the souls of the remaining Servants.

With Archer's victory, the vessel had absorbed the soul of the fourth Servant, and the sealing enchantment had disappeared. With enormous amounts of prana now gathered, its residual

waves brought scorching heat to its surroundings. The corpse of the beautiful homunculus was consumed by the heat in a blink, reduced to ashes. The golden cup that was in contact with the outside air charred the floor and the curtains, and roaring flames enveloped the completely empty stage. On the stage, where the fire raged ever wilder, the golden cup floated in the air, as if upheld by invisible hands. The ceremony of the Holy Grail's descent, so desired by the Three Families of the Beginning, had begun silently without the presence of a priest.

Right then, a gap no wider than a hair, so minute and almost invisible, appeared on the Gate that was tightly closed. Through this tiny gap, something beyond the Gate silently seeped into the Holy Grail. It was much like mud; black, simply black, only black, a thing like mud. Seeping into the Holy Grail, it overflowed by one drop, then another drop, soon becoming a thin black line. Like a crack on a dam, it soon became a black torrent overflowing the vessel completely, draining onto the stage floor. The dirty mud seeped into the brand new building materials, eroding them, then flowed even further and deeper, like meltwater flow.

The trigger of the magecraft gun was pressed, the floor moaned from the heavy step—in that moment, the two saw only each other. They did not detect *it* dribbling down through the ceiling. At that brief moment between life and death, the two men were drenched in the black dirty mud that descended from above.

– 03:52:18

Now, pain had become everything to Kariya. There was no longer any difference between Matou Kariya, the human that felt pain, or Matou Kariya, the piece of trash that understood the concept of pain. None of this mattered any more. He had never understood cause and effect; which part of him hurt for what reason, or why he had to experience this sort of torment.

It hurt his lungs to breathe. It hurt his heart to beat. It hurt to think. It hurt to remember. There was nowhere to run; there was nothing that could be done. He had felt like this before, but he could not remember. Perhaps he had already given up on himself. The worms were crying within his body; the worms were writhing their bodies in pain. At this moment, the culprits of his torment were also making their final struggle.

It must be that resentful black spirit, Berserker. At this moment, Berserker was fighting; the prana he required far exceeded his Master's capacity, and he was out of control. The worms suffered from excessive prana drain, and tore at Kariya's internal organs in their ceaseless struggle. But there was no other way. Berserker must fight—that was what that priest had said. Kariya no longer remembered his name—but they had both made an agreement; he had agreed to let Kariya have the Grail; hence Berserker must fight.

The Grail . . . right now, it meant everything to Kariya. As long as he had the Grail, the war could end. As long as he had the Grail, Sakura could be saved. And something else—but

remembering was too painful. It was beyond his capacity for thought.

Kariya did not even know what this place was. Though in icy darkness initially, he now felt a strange heat, and even breathing was difficult. He thought he smelled something burning; perhaps his own body had been immolated, but that did not matter. In any case, he could not move his body; the priority now was Berserker's fight—and saving Sakura.

Sakura—ah, he would really like to see her just once more. But not Rin; he could not see her. He must not see her—wait, why was that, again? Even thinking brought him pain. His brain, his consciousness, and his soul were being crushed. Something was amiss; it seemed something important had happened. Something had gone awry. Though he was aware that something was different, Kariya's thoughts were bound again in endless torment. It hurt—and there was only pain, and suffering.

For the umpteenth time, she was thrown into the air, and effortlessly beaten to the ground. Saber had given up counting, because she could no longer remember. The strongest sword-wielding Servant? Who had fabricated this illusion? She was now like a small boat in a storm. Against Berserker's waving black sword, she could only abandon resistance and suffer the attack; she could not make a single retaliatory blow. Yet, this did not make her indignant. Her heart, steeped in hopelessness, had given up its fighting spirit. She was no longer the heroic King of Knights, the incarnation of the dragon.

She should be saving Irisviel now; they had made a vow to raise the Grail together. She could not lower her head now; she knew this clearly in her heart. But she could not win. Against that man, that sword, there was no way to obtain victory.

Arondight • The Indestructible Light of the Lake was the counterpart to King Arthur's Sword of Promised Victory, the most precious of swords that had been obtained by men from the fairy lands. That sword was now dyed pitch-black; the prana from his body, filled with resentment, had turned that sword into the sword of a mad warrior. He had been the unrivalled 'perfect knight' admired by the masses; he had been a blooming flower on the precipitous peak of the knights' way. His form and his actions had once been the greatest treasure to all who harbored the ambition of becoming a knight. And yet, he had committed himself to madness. Hatred roiled in the red eyes, and he gave out an animalistic howl.

I hate you, I curse you, he roared. How was she to avoid the hatred-filled sword that he brandished? At the sight of him, her vision blurred in tears, and her legs buckled. All she could do now was protect her body before suffering the fatal impact.

Sir Lancelot, Knight of the Lake; the clues to his identity had been everywhere. Once, he had hidden his name for the sake of a friend's honor, disguising himself to enter a horse race. Though he had fallen into a trap and faced the enemy's sharp blades with only his bare hands, he had won the victory with only the branch of an elm, thanks to his skilled fighting prowess.

Though she noticed, Saber refused to admit it. He, who had been the subject of people's admiration, would be reduced to a

Berserker—how could he be that Knight of the Lake? Saber had once believed that they were friends. Even if their armies had clashed for unavoidable reasons, in their hearts they were nevertheless still the same. One was a subject who upheld the way of the knight, the other, a king who upheld the way of the knight. But was this sort of partnership also only a naïve fantasy of her own?

He had never forgiven, and never accepted it. Even after his death, he had still cursed with resentment that ending, that tragic fate. Lancelot and Guinevere had loved each other—yet Arturia had not seen this inescapably unrighteous action as a betrayal; this had all happened because the King had concealed her gender. The one who had to carry the burden of this conflict all her life was Guinevere.

Arturia had understood the severity of this sacrifice, and expressed her guilt-tinged thankfulness to Guinevere. But for Lancelot, who had fallen in love with her, she had even felt relief. This person who had the same ideals as the King would not cause the country to fall into a dangerous situation; she believed that he would share the burden with her. And in truth, he had indeed done so. Though he had faced the dilemma of his unrighteous path, he had supported Guinevere from the dark, and supported the King.

His ugly exposure, which put the two knights on opposing sides, was planned by traitors who hated Camelot. Lancelot could not sit and watch his beloved killed, so Arturia could only deal with him in the capacity of a king. No one was wrong; the tragedy took place precisely because everyone was right. Arturia had

always fought upright as a King to the very end. In that blood-dyed battlefield on the hill, she was able to argue with Heaven about the unfairness of fate.

If one had taken every step in striving for something, but could not obtain the desired result, it was definitely Heaven who was at fault. She could only forever lift her head up high if the Grail that can fulfil miracles existed. She fought precisely for that belief.

But—

"[redacted]"

Before Arondite's relentless attack, Saber's holy sword groaned. Her sword of light that promised victory was meaningless in the hands of its owner who had lost the will to fight. Berserker constantly rebuked Saber, who, unable to counterattack, could only defend. He had completely unleashed his true ability, and his skill with the sword was incomparable with his previous demonstrations. But in the face of her opponent's ferocious attack, and the sense of pain in her hands and legs that had long since become numb, Saber remained unmoved. The enemy's strong prowess that was many times greater than her own, and his merciless attack was gradually causing her spirit to crumble.

Ahah, my friend . . . Is this your true intention? Does fate despair you thus? Are you truly using hatred to curse the king and country that brought you despair? We had once embraced the same dream, and put our lives on the line for the sake of saving the country. If there was no difference in our ambition, why do you hate thus? Do you regret now?

—One cannot lead by salvation alone—

No. Tell me it is not like this. Lancelot, only you . . . I hope you understand, because you truly are their ideal knight. Please nod, and agree that our methods are entirely correct . . .

—Abandoning the people who have lost their way, desiring to become a saint on one's own—

"Stop!" Relying on the last of her reason, Saber blocked the black sword that fell heavily; at the same time, she shouted with all her strength.

"Stop . . . please . . ." Amid sobbing, she sank weakly to a kneeling position on the ground, at her limit, unable to move. Perhaps this was her only salvation; against such stubbornness and hatred, she had no other recompense available but to take that blow from him. As she abandoned all resistance, Berserker suddenly stopped moving.

They could not have known that ten seconds ago, the Crest worms in Kariya, who was hiding in the equipment room of the underground parking area, had ceased their activity. Kariya's prana, already in short supply, was drained increasingly to sustain Berserker's existence, and the unleashing of the final Noble Phantasm only multiplied the strain manyfold. The burden finally exhausted the Crest worms. The backup prana, which could have sustained the Servant in physical form for several hours in the Master's absence, had also been consumed completely; he came to an emergency halt, like a malfunctioning machine.

In the abrupt silence, Saber could feel in her hand the gradual fading of Berserker's heartbeat. The sharp blade of her precious sword pierced the black armor, its hilt tightly gripped in her hand. This ending was truly too ironic; who could have foreseen it? In this fleeting instant, the victory had been decided; a sliver of greed made Saber ashamed of herself, and she shed tears.

She should not have killed him, but nevertheless had delivered the killing blow to one she should never have killed. She was now mere prisoner to an idea—it was as Diarmuid had rebuked her at his last; she, stepping over countless corpses, desired only the wish-granting machine's miracles. This was the truest face of Saber in this moment.

"Even so, I still want the Grail." Tears fell onto trembling gauntlets, mingling with the blood of Berserker which had slid down the blade. "If I do not do this, my friend . . . If I do not do this, I will have no recompense to offer you."

"—Saddening indeed. Things have come to this, and you still make excuses to fight?"

The voice inspired nostalgia. She raised her head. The knight's gaze was as before, the tranquil surface of a lake gazing at the King's tear-stained face. The contract with his Master now dispelled, he was now released from the spell of madness, in the moment right before his vanishment.

"Lancelot . . ."

"Yes . . . Thank you. Perhaps, this is the only way I can convey my longing." Looking upon the sword that pierced his body with a

compassionate gaze, Lancelot smiled wryly as he continued to speak. "Actually . . . at that time, I had hoped that you would personally punish me. My King . . . At that time, I really wished you would denounce me out of your own anger . . ." The traitor knight, Lancelot, called the culprit of the Round Table's split, thus spoke in sorrow to his only friend, who had never blamed him even at the very end. "If I could have been punished by you . . . If you had demanded recompense from me . . . I would definitely have believed in redemption. I would definitely have believed that one day I could find a way to forgive myself. The Queen probably feels the same way . . ."

This was the regret of a man and a woman. They embraced the same ideal as the King, but because they had been too weak, they had not been able to carry this ideal through. And even in death, the two had not been able to obtain salvation. They had blamed themselves deeply for betraying a most important person, and carried the burden of this self-blame for a lifetime. Pain such as this—to whom could it be told? Exactly what kind of admonishment, dealt to whom, could have given them respite?

Sighing deeply, Lancelot relaxed his body, falling into the embrace of the King. The body in her arms was very light; a lump rose in Saber's throat. The Servant's fading body seemed almost weightless.

"I guess I did borrow your breast after all, even if it had to be this way . . ." The Knight of the Lake quietly whispered and sighed, like one in a naptime dream. "To die in the King's arms, before the King's eyes . . . haha! It really . . . makes me feel like a loyal knight . . ."

"Do not speak this way—" Saber anxiously answered. Before he disappeared, there was something that she needed to tell him. She hoped that he would understand. The two words, "feel like," had no place in those last words of his. *You are a loyal knight,* she wanted to say. *No one knows better than I the sincerity you devoted to the country, and to the King.* There was no need for self-reproach. His character would not be be overturned by a single mistake, not even an impermissible one.

I don't want to shame you; I don't want to lose you. Because of this wish of mine, I can truly deny this so-called crime you have committed. These thoughts, Arturia's true mind, could not become the knight's salvation. He closed his eyes as if in deep slumber, but his body was gradually dispersing. Saber witnessed all this, but no right words came to her lips.

"Lancelot, you are actually . . .!" *You are not a sinner*—but what significance would such words still hold for him? Even if someone denied his crime, the one most caught up in this wrongdoing was still Lancelot himself. Why had she been unaware of this lonely thought of his? Why had she been unable to release the noble spirit of this knight from a self-reproach that bordered on madness?

—A King will not understand another's feelings—

These words she heard as she left the Round Table—who had spoken them? The knight's dead body did not say anything more; alongside the last remaining light, he vanished. "—Wait . . . Wait . . . Lance—" Staring at the crook of her arm, the weight it bore

now empty, Saber began sobbing. She could not make a sound. She did not allow herself to make even the slightest sound. In that last moment, as she faced a loyal knight, she had nota single word of reassurance for him. What right had she to cry now? A King can only be lonely and proud—

This she said to herself; as she searched for the path to her kingdom's salvation, how many opinions and troubles had she neglected? Gawain, who heroically sacrificed himself; Galahad, who lost his life in the line of duty; what were their thoughts at their last moments? Did they leave this world with the same regret and unwillingness? How could she be certain that was not true? Saber cried soundlessly, tormented by countless thorns piercing her heart.

Perhaps, as King, she should never have been placed on a pedestal—had it turned out thus, would it not have brought about a broken end? Could everyone be saved?

"... It isn't over." From her sobbing throat came the determined voice of an ever-victorious King. "It can be compensated ... It's not too late ... I still have the Grail. I still have the miracle that can overturn fate."

Leaning upon the sword of victory, Saber stood up. Even if she was unable to listen to the hearts of people, even if she was rebuked for being a proud and aloof King, none of that mattered at all. If she could win victory for her homeland and her subjects with her own hands, it would be enough—this was what she asked of herself, what she must do as King. As long as she could obtain the Grail, everything could be made up for; all the previous

mistakes could be made aright.This belief was everything to Saber, who had chosen the path of the King.

Covered with wounds, Saber marched onward.

– 03:52:07

The killing continued. With bullets, knives, poisons, explosives; piercing, cleaving, immolating, drowning, crushing.

He never doubted its meaning, not once; he carefully estimated each value. The ones on the lower side of the scales must be saved; the other side must be emptied, so he killed. He kept killing, and killing, and killing.

Yes, that was correct. The many should be saved, and the sacrifices should be recognized. If the joys he protected outweighed the misfortunes, would the world not have moved a little closer to its salvation? Even if innumerable corpses piled at his feet, as long as lives were saved, the ones that were protected were surely priceless.

"—That's right, Kiritsugu. You are right." Suddenly, he saw his wife at his side. With a smile filled with gentle kindness, she drew closer to him, standing next to him on the mountain of corpses. "I knew you would come. I believed in you, knowing that you would arrive here eventually."

"Iri—" It was a nostalgic and lovely face, but something about it that bothered him. Was it the black dress he had never seen before? Part of it; however, he could not help feeling he was overlooking something more important.

That's right; what happened to Saber? What happened to the remaining three teams of enemies? What happened to Kotomine Kirei? There were far too many questions. Which one should he

start with? Helplessly, Kiritsugu asked the question that first came to mind.

"What is this place?"

"This is where your wish will be granted. We are inside the Grail you sought." Irisviel answered with a welcoming smile. Kiritsugu was lost for words, and looked around him.

A pulsating sea of black mud. Rotten corpses formed sunken mountains here and there. The sky was crimson, like blood. In the descending rain of black mud, a jet-black sun held up the heavens. Winds of curses and resentment blew. If there was a word, for this place, how can it be anything but Hell?

"You're saying . . . this is the Holy Grail?"

"That's right. But fear not, it is still merely a shapeless dream, just waiting to be born."

"Look, there." Irisviel pointed to the sky. At the center of this world, there was a swirl of deep black that he originally thought was a sun, a hole that pierced the heavens. A hole filled to the brim with heavy, bottomless darkness, an incredible mass that seemed able to crush all. "That is the Holy Grail. It has yet to obtain a shape, but the vessel is already sufficiently filled. All that is needed now is to announce the prayer. No matter what wish you may ask of it, it will take a form most fitting to realize it. Once it obtains form and shape in this era, it will be able to go outside for the first time."

". . ."

"Please, hurry and give it shape. You are a human fit to define its nature. Kiritsugu, announce your wish to the Grail."

Kiritsugu wordlessly gazed at that repulsive hole. It could not possibly be tolerated by any human of proper sensibility. How is Irisviel able to smile so calmly? Yes, that smile certainly felt out of place. After all—

"... Who are you?" Stifling his sense of dread with anger, Kiritsugu asked the wife who stood before him. "If the preparations of the Grail are in order, Irisviel should already be lost to me. Just who are you?"

"I am Irisviel. There is no problem in thinking that."

The muzzle of the magecraft gun in Kiritsugu's right hand, the Contender he had been grasping tightly the whole time since the battle with Kirei, was now thrust at his opponent.

"Don't dodge the question. Answer me!"

Before the bloodthirsty muzzle, the woman in the black dress simply smiled with loneliness, seemingly pitying Kiritsugu for such demands.

"... True, I can't deny that this is a mask. If I don't put on an existing personality as a shell, we would not be able to comprehend one another. I had to take this form to convey my desire. But the personality of Irisviel which I recorded is unmistakably genuine. The last thing she touched before her extinguishment was me. That is why I inherited her last desire; it is my duty to personify her wish to remain this way."

With that confession, Kiritsugu understood, not as theory but as instinct. In this place, the inside of the Holy Grail, an existence which would call itself one who is no one could only be—

"—Are you ... the will of the Holy Grail?"

"That interpretation is not incorrect." Irisviel's form nodded in approval, but Kiritsugu further furrowed his brows in restless bewilderment.

"That's ridiculous. The Holy Grail can't be anything more than a colorless force. There's no way it can have a will."

"That might be so before. But it's different now. I have a will, and a desire. The will to be born into this world."

"That can't be . . ." Strange—something was strange. If this was true, would this thing not be the convenient wishing machine that Kiritsugu had sought.

"—If you have a will, answer me this. How does the Holy Grail plan to grant my desire?"

As though she was asked something incredibly strange, Irisviel tilted her head.

"That? Isn't that something you, Kiritsugu, know better than anyone else?"

". . . What did you say?"

"The nature of a human being like you is infinitely close to mine. That is why you can preserve your rationality even after being connected to me. The mind of normal humans would have collapsed the moment they were washed over by that mud." Irisviel spoke, cheerfully, brightly, as though in celebration. The smile disturbed Kiritsugu's heart. "The way to save the world? Haven't you already understood that a long time ago? That is why I, according to what you have built up, will inherit that nature, and achieve what you had prayed for."

"What are you—talking about?" Kiritsugu could not understand. He did not want to understand, not even if he was

mistaken. "Answer me. What is the Holy Grail planning to do? What will it start if it materializes in this era?!"

At this exchange of endless disagreement, Irisviel sighed in resignation, and nodded.

"It can't be helped. From now on, I will ask from inside you." She held her white and graceful palm over Kiritsugu's eyes, and the world blacked out.

Two ships floated on the ocean. One held three hundred people; the other held two hundred people. There were five hundred crew members and passengers in total, in addition to Emiya Kiritsugu. For this thought experiment, the five hundred and one were set up as the last survivors of the human race.

Emiya Kiritsugu will now take charge of this role-play and address the following propositions. Holes of critical size have opened up in the bilges of both ships at the same time. Only Kiritsugu possessed the skill to repair the ships. In the time it takes to repair one ship, the other will sink.

Now then, which ship will you fix?

"... The one with three hundred aboard, of course."

After you make that decision, the two hundred aboard the other ship capture you and make this demand: "Fix this ship first!" *Now then, what will you do?*

"I ..." Before he could speak his reply, a Calico submachine gun appeared in Kiritsugu's hand. Flames savagely spouted from its muzzle, the machine seemingly acting on its own will. Kiritsugu watched it, dumbfounded. A single bullet pierced four people, and all two hundred people were massacred in an instant.

That is correct. That is what one would expect from Emiya Kiritsugu. Kiritsugu watched in a daze as the ship sank, carrying its mountain of stacked corpses. He got the feeling that every one of the corpses scattered on the deck had faces that he recognized.

Now then, the surviving three hundred people abandon the damaged ship, split onto two new ships, and continue their voyage. This time, one ship held two hundred people; the other held one hundred people. Once again, holes open up in the bilges of both ships at the same time.

"Hold it . . ."

The one hundred aboard the smaller ship abduct you, and coerce you to fix their ship first. Now then, what will you do?

"But . . . that's . . ."

With the flash of a naked sword, and a bomb burst, one hundred people disappeared into watery graves. That was the way of Emiya Kiritsugu. The slaughter was accomplished according to precedents he had set in the past. That is correct.

"That's . . . that's ridiculous!" What had been correct about this?

Two hundred people survived. Three hundred people died for them—that was the complete opposite of the scale's balance needle. No, the calculation was not incorrect. You certainly chose to save the many and sacrifice the few. Now, on to the next quest. Indifferent to Kiritsugu's protests, the gamemaster continued.

A hundred and twenty were balanced against eighty on the scales. Kiritsugu killed every single one of the eighty.

Next, it was eighty against forty. The Magus Killer ascertained the death throes of the forty. He remembered every face. They were the ones who had been killed by his hands in the past.

Sixty against twenty—

Twenty-five against fifteen—

The choices continued. The sacrifices continued. The mountain of corpses grew.

"This . . . is what you wanted to show me?" Even as Kiritsugu recalled his nausea at the aim of this vile game, he listened intently to the thing that called itself the will of the Holy Grail. *That's right. This is your truth, the answer within Emiya Kiritsugu. In other words, the acts that should be carried out by the Holy Grail as a wishing machine.*

"No!" Kiritsugu shouted, his hands stained by blood. "I didn't wish for something like this! I wanted some other method . . . that's why I had no choice but to rely on a miracle . . ."

A method you yourself are not aware of could not possibly be included in your desire. You wished for the salvation of the world; therefore, it can only be realized by the means you are aware of.

"To hell with that! How is . . . *this* a miracle?!"

It is a miracle. What you had once aspired for, the deed that you were unable to achieve alone will finally be carried out on a scale unattainable by Man's own hands. This is nothing short of a miracle.

Five remained. They were all important to Kiritsugu. But he was pressed to choose either the three or the two. Whimpering in despair, he pulled the trigger. The face of Emiya Noritaka was blown away. The gray matter of Natalia Kaminsky was scattered.

"You . . . you're going to descend onto the modern era, and . . . do this to the entire human race? This is the realization of my ideal?!"

That's right. Your desire is a suitable form for the Holy Grail. Emiya Kiritsugu, you truly are suited to bear Angra Mainyu.

Three remained. Will he save the two, or choose the one? He grasped the hilt of his knife with shaking hands. His tears had already run dry. With ghostly, empty eyes, Kiritsugu tore Hisau Maiya's body apart. Again, and again, he swung the knife down.

And now, only two who survived in the world. Two equal values which did not need weighing on the scales, which could not be measured—the last hope he protected to the end, and exchanged with the lives of four hundred and ninty-eight people. Everything now accomplished, Kiritsugu, dazed and husk-like, was embraced by the warmth of a hearth.

In a nostalgic, gentle, warm room, smiling gazes were exchanged between the faces of his wife and daughter. This . . . was the world of tranquility which he sought. There would be no more conflict; no one will have to be hurt. It was a perfect utopia.

"Welcome home, Kiritsugu. You're finally back!"

Her joyful face beaming, Ilyasviel swung her small arms around her father's neck. The castle enclosed by clouds in the farthest north was the only place of tranquility. At the end of a bloodstained life, he found a kindness which should not even exist. If this modest child's room was itself the entirety of the world, there would no longer be a need for discord.

"—See? You understand, don't you? This is the Holy Grail's realization of your prayer." Sharing this moment of utter bliss with her husband, Irisviel smiled.

All that was needed, was to pray for it. His wife could be awakened. His daughter could be brought back. For a near-infinite amount of prana, it would be a simple miracle. The only thing left was bliss. As the remnants of humanity on this planet of death where everything had perished, the family of three could continue to live in eternal happiness.

"... We, can't go looking for walnuts anymore ..." There was not even a snowy landscape outside the window, but simply a swirling back mud, like the bottom of the sea. At Kiritsugu's absentminded murmur, Ilyasviel shook her head.

"It's all right. I'll be fine as long as Kiritsugu and Mother are together with me."

Petting and hugging the head of the daughter he frantically loved, Kiritsugu cried surging tears. "Thank you ... Daddy loves you too, Ilya. I swear, if nothing else, that is true ..."

But the hands moved without faltering, like mechanical contraptions. Against the small chin of his beloved daughter, the Contender's muzzle was tightly pressed.

"Goodbye, Ilya."

The head of the little girl staring puzzledly exploded with the sound of a gunshot. On Kiritsugu's tear-stained cheeks, a piece of meat, entangled with silver hair, landed. Irisviel screamed. Tearing at her eyes, tossing her hair wildly, she cried out in fury, without control.

"Wha—what did you do—?!"

His wife came reaching out to him with the face of a devil, but it was Kiritsugu who pressed down on her instead, entwining his fingers around that small throat.

"The Holy Grail is something that cannot exist . . ."

No matter what was inside, the personality of Irisviel it wore as a shell was real. The despair and lamentation of her daughter's murder; the hatred for the husband who killed her own child; they were unmistakably what the real Irisviel would have bore—her genuine emotions. Staring at it, accepting it, Kiritsugu put all his strength into his two hands, and pressed down on the neck of his wife.

"What are . . . you . . . why did you . . . reject the Grail, reject us . . .? My Ilya . . . no, why?!"

"—Because I—"

The voice that leaked from his mouth was empty, like a wind blowing from a hollow cave through a crevice. There was no sorrow or anger; it was obvious that there was no longer anything inside Emiya Kiritsugu. He turned his back on the miracle he had pursued, and relinquished even the compensation for that betrayal. There could not be anything inside him now.

"I . . . will save the world." The only thing left, persisting to the very end, was those words of his belief. How hollow those ringing words were! Irisviel stared at Kiritsugu as blood congested on her white face. The crimson eyes that always looked at him with nothing but affection and admiration were now stained by bottomless cursing and resentment.

"—Curse you—"

The five small fingers, once so graceful, grabbed Kiritsugu's shoulder. From the five fingers biting into him flowed a black mud.

"Curse you . . . Emiya Kiritsugu . . . to pain . . . to regret until death . . . I will never, forgive you . . .!"

"That is fine." The hatred-stained mud circulated in his veins, flowing into his heart. It drenched the soul of the man who lost everything. Still, Kiritsugu's fingers did not slacken. Forgetting even the meaning of the tears down his cheeks, he told the woman in the black dress as he continued to strangle her. "That is all right. Like I said—I will bear you."

In his shaking hands, the woman's spine snapped and broke. And the landscape was altered once again.

—The dream that deeply violated his heart ended, seemingly lasting only for an instant. Before he realized it, Kiritsugu was standing back in the stage warehouse. In his right hand was the Contender with its firing hammer still raised. Kotomine Kirei was right before his eyes, unconscious in a kneeling position.

Kiritsugu looked up to the ceiling and gazed at the black mud that still dripped all around him, charring the floor. Both of them had been covered in the mud at the same time, and they probably saw the very same thing. If that mud was the content pouring from the Holy Grail, the vessel must have continued the ritual of advent the entire time, at the concert hall stage on the floor above them. He had to hurry.

Kirei regained his consciousness and tried to stand, but was hindered by the muzzle of Kiritsugu's gun pressing against his

back. He understood the situation immediately, and a bitter laugh slipped from his mouth at the irony. They were locked in such a hard-fought, life-and-death struggle; in the end, what decided the outcome was merely who chanced to wake first. Or perhaps—it was logical that the one who ended the nightmare by his own will first would be the first to awaken.

"... You are a fool beyond comprehension. Why did you reject it?" It was a restrained voice, hiding his anger and hatred. For the first time, Emiya Kiritsugu heard Kotomine Kirei's voice directly.

"... Did it look agreeable to you?" It was a dry and hoarse voice, so worn down it sounded hollow. For the first time, Kotomine Kirei heard Emiya Kiritsugu's voice directly. They had both touched the thing that was submerged in the Holy Grail and understood its true form. Kiritsugu and the will of the Holy Grail had understood one another; Kirei saw that with his own eyes. And Kiritsugu's choice was, to Kirei, far beyond comprehension or tolerance.

"You ... you must have arrived here by throwing everything away, by sacrificing everything! You did all that to achieve *this;* how could you just make it worthless now?!"

"The things that must be sacrificed for it are more severe than the things it can bring about—that's all there is to it."

"In that case, yield it to me!" It was then that Kirei drew on his hatred for Emiya Kiritsugu at the bottom of his heart—hatred for the man whom he once thought might be like himself, but who turned out to be very much the opposite.

"Even if it's unnecessary to you, I have a use for it! With that ... if that thing is born, it will answer all my doubts!"

Kirei knew of Kiritsugu's intentions. He understood what this man, so resolute in rejecting the wishing machine that he had even laid hands on his most beloved, would do next. It was something he could not forgive. All of Kotomine Kirei's wanderings heretofore were being put on the line.

"Just don't kill it! It wishes for its own life, to be born!" Forbidden to even turn around, the priest implored fervently. The assassin looked down at him with an icy gaze.

"Yeah, and you—you're just too much of a fool to understand."

His finger slipped onto the trigger, squeezing it, and the firing hammer punched into the primer of the .30–06 Springfield bullet. Gunfire flashed, and a thunderous roar followed. With a single faultless round, Kiritsugu shot out Kotomine Kirei's heart.

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Saber walked through the flames that burned like purgatory. The wounds Berserker had inflicted were beyond her regenerative abilities. The once shining platinum armor was stained black in places by Berserker's countless attacks. Her bloodless skin was white as paper. Her knees were weak, her ankles trembled, and her breathing was rapid. Pain wracked her entire body with every step, almost making her lose consciousness. Though every step was difficult, she did not stop walking. She still bore the responsibility of a king, and the promise that she must fulfill as king. There was only one way to do that—obtain the Grail. She had to go on; spurring on her wounded body, she gritted her teeth and walked on.

She reached the first floor at last. Passing through the entrance, she pushed the main door open, and an empty music hall appeared before her eyes. In the middle of the stage, the Grail floated, encircled by flames, shining with eye-catching golden light.

"Ah . . ."

It was clear at a glance; this was undoubtedly the Grail she had desired so much. The corporal body of the homunculus had reverted to the gold vessel that was forged from inorganic material. Saber did not know the process by which this had happened, but she could tell, from the scene before her, exactly what had happened.

She was the Guardian of the Vessel, determined to pass the Grail to Kiritsugu and Saber. If there was a possibility that the Vessel could be stolen, she would definitely come forth to defend the Grail unto death. Now, the ritual setting was missing Irisviel's form; controlled by an invisible hand, the Grail was about to descend.

"Irisviel . . ."

Remembering her voice and her smile, Saber bit her lip with a sob. She had sworn on her sword to protect her, but had been unable to do so. She had reneged on her vow. Just like she had been unable to save her beloved home country, and unable to resolve the torment of a friend. Self-reproach and humiliation tore at her heart. The city eternally covered in falling snow, and the words of Irisviel as they had exchanged vows, flashed in her mind.

—Saber, you must get the Grail. For you, and your Master—

". . . Yes, I will at least keep this promise. Only this promise . . ." supported Saber now. At this moment, she still held the precious sword in her hand; she still breathed, and her heart still beat. All this, for one reason. Saber stepped forward resolutely. Right then —

"Too slow, Saber. Even if you were bitten by that domesticated mad dog, you should not have let me wait this long." A devastating golden form was standing in the middle of the aisle in the spectator stand, blocking Saber's way.

"Archer . . ."

"Heh heh, don't make that expression. I know you are envious of my riches, but do show more restraint. That undisguised expression is really tasteless, like a dog gone hungry for too long."

The enemy's appearance was not unexpected to Saber. This municipal hall was the final gathering place for all the Servants that still remained. It was too naïve to hope they would perish together. There was still one battle left, and the adversary would be either Archer or Rider.

But Archer's intact armor and his leisurely presence, infused with prana, made Saber grit her teeth. Not a hair of this golden Servant had come to harm; he even seemed to be at full capability. She had been seriously injured in the battle with Berserker; her hopes of defeating Archer were pinned on her opponent having been drained considerably in the battle with Rider. But at this moment, not even a single scratch from battle could be seen on Archer. Unexpectedly, the King of Conquerors had been unable to exact his revenge for that one sword blow . . . Was this Servant, identity still unknown, really so strong? Now, even the last thread of hope had been ground out of existence, but in Saber's heart still flared a flame of anger.

Chances of victory, or tactics—none of that mattered any more. Saber only thought it unforgivable that even now, someone still stood between her and the Grail. "You, get out of the way . . ." Saber's low voice was filled with hatred. The insane obsession filled her once clear jade eyes with a murky yellow-brown. "The Grail . . . is mine . . .!"

The many wounds on Saber's body could not stop her; roaring, she swung her sword at Archer. But after a single step, her left leg

was immediately pierced through by a Noble Phantasm that shot out of the air. Saber fell to the floor, but gritted her teeth to prevent herself from groaning. Looking around, she saw clusters of weapons continually appear from the Gate of Babylon, all pointed at her, ready to be launched any time. As soon as their owner gave the order, countless primeval Noble Phantasms would be launched in unison toward Saber. With her left leg now pierced through, she could not even dodge.

"Saber . . . this sight of you crouched on the ground, fallen in such presumptuous obsession, makes you even more beautiful . . ." Archer's blood-red eyes held an uncomfortable emotion as he looked at Saber, who despite being mired in a hopeless situation, still intended to make a final struggle. "I don't know why you are so obsessed with some wish-granting Grail. Saber . . . that a woman like you exists can already be considered a rare miracle, no?"

Archer's tone was unnaturally calm, as though there were not a dangerous enemy before him. This calm made the cornered Saber suspicious.

"What . . . are you saying—?"

"Throw away your sword, and be my wife."

In this situation, in this circumstance, Archer's words surprised Saber. She was stunned by the sheer unexpectedness of it.

". . . Wh—what did you say . . .? What are you going to do!?"

"Even if you don't understand, do such words not bring joy to your heart? Not just anyone, but I, have admitted your worth." Perhaps only Archer would have thought that such a conclusion was a matter of course. The golden Servant arrogantly lifted his

head, looking ahead at the first woman he had ever loved. "Abandon these pointless ideals and vows. These things will only restrict you and bring you misfortune. In future, you need only desire me and live under my protection. In that case I vow, on my honor as King of everything, that I will grant you all the happiness in the world."

His presumptuous tone was enough to re-ignite the flame of anger in Saber's conflicted heart.

"Is this ridiculous motive . . . your reason for fighting me for the Grail?" A second Noble Phantasm exploded as it flew past Saber's nose. The force of the impact blew Saber into the air.

"I am not asking your opinion, but informing you of my decision." Archer's face displayed a bloodthirsty joy, relishing the sight of Saber's furious resistance. This proud Heroic Spirit had never seen his opponent as a competitor of equal standing with himself. The enemy was worthy only of being manipulated and humiliated; he liked to admire the sight of their surrender to him. Saber's desperate retaliation, on which she had gambled her all, was to Archer only an ordinary entertainment.

"All right, let's have your response. Although the answer is right before you, I am very curious to see the expression you will wear as you say these words yourself."

"I refuse! I will never—" Without waiting for her to finish, Archer's lightning-fast Noble Phantasm once again pierced into Saber's already injured left leg. Hearing Saber's groans of intense pain, Archer could not but laugh loudly. "You can't say it because you are too shy? It's all right; I'll forgive you no matter how many times you get it wrong. First you must learn suffering, and

then you will be able to experience the joy I give you." The Noble Phantasms floating in midair waved their sharp blades intimidatingly, gradually pressing closer to Saber.

An uncontrollable anger roiled in Saber's thoughts. Rather than be killed in humiliation, she would try to get back at the enemy, even if it meant her life. There was no other way. If she concentrated all the strength left in her body, perhaps she could still eke out the prana needed for one last strike of Excalibur. It would not be surprising if a Heroic Spirit of such unfathomable ability could defend against the attack of an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm, but at this moment he completely believed that he would win, and that made him complacent; he had never thought that Saber would still retaliate.

And yet—if Saber launched a counterattack on Archer from this position, the impact would wreck the Grail on the stage. Even if Archer took the full impact and was reduced to charcoal, the Grail would also be inevitably destroyed. In that case, all her efforts would have come to nothing.

"What should I do . . . ?" Saber sank into a dilemma. Right then, she noticed a third figure in the hall, on the wall, approximately two floors up, within the semicircle-shaped box that did not protrude outward. In the light from the fire, a ghost-like silhouette appeared wearing a long windbreaker. He was the true Master who had made the contract with Saber—Emiya Kiritsugu.

A ray of sunlight emerged from hopelessness.

Kiritsugu still held the forceful commanding power of the Command Seals. If he could lend her the magecraft power that he possessed, the ability to make the impossible possible, perhaps she

would be able to break this stalemate. If Kiritsugu understood Saber's current situation, he would almost certainly use the Command Seals. Fortunately, Archer had not yet realized Kiritsugu's presence.

Kiritsugu raised his right hand, showing the Command Seals carved on the back. It was completely up to him what kind of order he would give. But Saber had already made up her mind that no matter how strange the battle tactics he intended to employ, she would do her utmost to carry them out. As long as she could retaliate against Archer, any method would be fine.

Even if his command was to block the sense of pain and use all her strength, Saber would ignore the pain of her physical body, and exert the greatest strength from within her body until there was nothing left. If he commanded her to teleport to the side of the Grail, she would be able to escape this extremely disadvantageous position. Perhaps, through precise calibration of Excalibur, she would be able to bring Archer down without harming the Grail. Such is a Command Seal. If the Command Seals were used with the consent of both Master and Servant, then no matter how impossible the task, it could be completed. In this moment, Saber entrusted everything to this last hope, because only it could turn the tables astonishingly on the current situation.

—Emiya Kiritsugu thus commands Saber with a Command Seal —

The low words shook her entire body from the depths of her soul. The voice, which could not have been more familiar, announced clearly and decisively.

—Use your Noble Phantasm, and destroy the Grail—

How the significance behind these words should be explained, and how she should understand them—Saber's mind went momentarily blank.

"... Wh—?"

The rising hurricane dispelled the surrounding flames. From the heart of the deactivated Invisible Air, the form of the golden sword appeared. Even if Saber's brain refused to understand, the physical body of the Servant loyally accepted the command of the Command Seal. The precious sword began to accumulate light, independently of its bearer's intention.

"Wh—What is this?—What do you intend to do!?"

Even Archer was stunned speechless. He had thought that with his back to the Grail, Saber would never execute a counterattack on him.

"... N ... no!" Saber roared in anger, screaming with all her strength. The golden sword, raised high, suddenly halted in midair.

As the legendary King of Knights, and a Servant of the most excellent class, the outstanding Magic Resistance ability Saber possessed could actually resist the restraint of the Command Seals, albeit just barely; she resisted bringing the sword down with all her strength. Opposing forces of compulsion and

resistance clashed intensely within Saber's body; her slender form seemed about to be torn apart at any time.

This intense pain and unimaginable torment brought to her mind the last moments of Diarmuid Ua Duibhne. Now she experienced for herself the utter bitterness and humiliation that the tragic Heroic Spirit had undergone. As she opposed the strong magecraft, Saber stared at Kiritsugu who stood in the middle of the box, and shouted.

"Why?! Kiritsugu—Why did it have to be you!?"

Impossible. It was impossible that he had given this order. Kiritsugu had wished to obtain the Grail so much—why, in this moment, why did he reject it? Was he going to let the ritual, which his wife had given her life to realize, go to waste?

Realizing that Saber's unnatural actions were the doing of the Command Seal, Archer finally noticed Emiya Kiritsugu's presence.

"Are you trying to ruin my wedding, mongrel?!"

The Noble Phantasms earlier aimed at Saber now suddenly turned in unison to target Kiritsugu's box. Without waiting for the Noble Phantasms to begin their attack, Kiritsugu again raised the back of his right hand toward Saber below him—there was still one last Command Seal carved there.

—I use the third Command Seal to command again—

"Stop!" Seeing that her pride and hope about to disintegrate into ashes in the blink of an eye, Saber shrieked out in tears.

—Saber, destroy the Grail—

That was an ultimate might which could not be resisted. The tremendous force of dual Command Seals ravaged and crushed Saber's form, drawing out all the prana that still remained within her body, weaving it into the light of destruction.

The released beam of light filled the cross-section of the entire hall, impacting the Grail that floated on the stage. Archer nimbly dodged this attack, but his close proximity to the high-intensity beam of light made him momentarily unable to execute the attack on Kiritsugu. In the heat of the lightning, the golden Grail that had once been a part of Irisviel's body now quietly lost its shape, then vanished. Saber closed her eyes, not daring to look directly at this sight—the last hope had now been destroyed. Her fight had ended. How could she look upon this tragic scene with open eyes?

But she never did open her eyes again. The Noble Phantasm, forcibly executed in opposition to her own intentions, had already consumed Saber's remaining prana; she could not even maintain her physical Servant form any more. Of course, this was also because her Master, who was also part of the contract, did not intend to let her stay.

Maintaining her sword-down stance, Saber began to leave this world; soon, her physical body had vanished as well. In the moment she lost contact with the real world, the riddle of this character Kiritsugu was the last consideration that flashed in Saber's mind. The adoring father who doted on his daughter, the warrior who hoped to save the world, the killer who had lost all hope in justice; he had displayed various conflicting pieces of

humanity, but in the end he had betrayed everything, denied everything.

Until the end, Saber could be sure only of the callousness and ruthlessness of this man's heart. Until the end, they had never been able to understand each other and build up a relationship of trust—no, perhaps it should be said that only at the final moment had she realized that she never understood his true thoughts.

And yet, that was also not altogether unjustifiable—within her gradually vanishing awareness, Saber mocked herself. How was she to understand this man who had not crossed paths with her beyond the three orders he had given? She had once been unable to understand even the hearts of those at her side. Perhaps this was the long and euphemistic punishment that tormented the King who did not understand the hearts of others'.

Though Saber left the world carrying many injuries, without achieving the burden in her heart, perhaps not having to witness the tragedy that came after was also a sort of recompense to her. The beam of light from Excalibur that had destroyed the Grail had blown away the ceiling of the stage, and sheared the entire municipal hall into two. The building, burnt beyond recognition, could not withstand the blow. The structure of the upper levels had been destroyed; the roof, having lost its support, now dropped into the hall like an avalanche.

Through the fragments of debris, Kiritsugu saw *it* in the revealed night sky: a black sun, which he had seen when he had touched the black mud; the sign of the end of the world.

Back then, Kiritsugu had not seen clearly that its physical form was truly a hole. It is a space tunnel connected to the Magic Circle

of the Greater Grail, which had been hidden beneath the altar of the ritual of descent, deep underground in Mount Enzou to the east of Miyama. The insides of the Greater Grail, which had drawn energy from the leylines for sixty years and now had obtained the souls of six Heroic Spirits, had been filled to the brim and turned into an enormous prana whirlpool. That was the true form of that black hole.

The vessel which had been removed from the Einsberns' homunculus was only the key to open that hole, and also the control that sustained the stability of the hole. Kiritsugu, who did not know anything about this secret, had made a fatal mistake; he should not have commanded Saber to destroy the Grail, but made her use Excalibur to burn down the hole in the sky instead. No longer controlled by the vessel, the black sun began to melt; the hole gradually shrunk, but it was already completely impossible to prevent the black mud flowing out from within the hole before it closed completely.

This opening to the outside world had been created with a neutral energy, but Kiritsugu's previous mistake had stained with the pitch-black color of the curse; the cursed mud was full of Angra Mainyu • All the Evil in the World. Its destructive power could burn away all the life in the world, and at this moment it descended like a great waterfall from above the municipal hall.

Archer, standing in the spectator stands on the first floor, could not escape this baptism.

"This . . . this is . . .!?"

The turbulent black waves carried away the helpless golden Servant. No, he was not simply carried away; the moment he had

touched the black mud, he had vanished. Archer's body had been broken down and absorbed by the black mud in the blink of an eye; he had become one with the tempestuous flow of mud.

It consumed the ground-floor spectator stand like a tsunami; Kiritsugu, escaping the misfortune in the box, stared blankly at the sight. The cursed waterfall that descended from midair showed no signs of stopping; the black mud became a river as it passed through the entrance of the municipal hall, flowing out of the building and spreading out toward the surrounding districts. Thus, the massacre began.

The people were all sleeping soundly; the mud of death sensed the presence of human life, and became a burning curse that attacked at their pillowside. It burned houses, and courtyards. Sleepers, wakers and escapers—all burned without exception; having waited within the Grail for sixty years, it now mercilessly seized all life it touched, seemingly celebrating its fleeting freedom.

In later reports, the causualty count stood at over 500, and 134 buildings had burned down. This great calamity of unknown cause left a mark in the hearts of the citizens of Fuyuki that was difficult to erase.

After some time, the hole in the sky disappeared, and the black mud no longer poured forth. But it had brought a large-scale fire; the people who had been unable to escape turned one by one into burnt black corpses. A magnificent red lotus of fire bloomed in the night sky; on the ground was staged an endless banquet of death.

Emiya Kiritsugu, safely escaped from the collapsing municipal hall, witnessed the entire process. The life that tended toward

destruction was so much like the scene that had tormented him in nightmares. But the scene before him now was undoubtedly real.

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She dreamed a dream, and in the dream, the world was burning. The young girl, wrapped in a duvet and trembling from fear, opened her eyes.

The bedroom, guarded by the warm firelight from the fireplace, was still calm and peaceful as before. The chilly night outside the window was no threat to the girl who lay on the bed. Even through the thick glass, she could hear the howling of the icy wind outside the window; the wind crept quietly into the house through the gap between the window and the frame. It was surely this sound that she mistook for the tormented cries of people as they burned and died.

—*What's wrong, Ilyasviel?*—

Her mother spoke, gently caressing her face. Her mother's voice and touch, which was always by her side, set her heart to rest at once.

The girl and her mother were both existences that had been designed in the image of the magus known as the Lady of Winter. In the girl's heart, there was her mother, and her aunt. Even if one traced one's way to the earliest Primeval Justizia, there it was, recorded in the girl's heart.

Thus, even on such a lonely night, the girl, sleeping soundly and wrapped in a duvet, would never be lonely. She need only call out, and she could hear her mother's voice any time, see her mother's form any time.

"Mommy . . . I had a scary dream. In the dream, Ilya became a cup." Gazing relieved at her mother's soft silver hair and gentle eyes, the girl continued to recount her nightmare. "Seven very, very big things were put into Ilya. Ilya almost broke, she was scared but also could not run away . . . then I heard Justizia's voice, and above my head appeared a big black hole . . . then, the world started to burn. Kiritsugu looked at the world, and cried."

Yes, she dreamed of him too. The father that she had heard say was in a faraway foreign land, dealing with some troublesome work. Thinking this, the girl suddenly realized that her nightmare just now seemed to represent something bad; she became uneasy again.

"Mommy . . . Kiritsugu will be okay, right? He won't be alone and scared?"

Looking at the girl worried for her father, the mother smiled gently.

—*It's okay*. He *will definitely strive, for Ilya's sake*. He *will definitely realize* his *dream, so that Ilya will not have such scary memories again, for us*—

". . . Nn, that's right, that's right."

She knew *he* had a strong desire to win. Once he had finished that important work, he would definitely return here

immediately. The girl spread her fingers, counting the days till that day came. Though it was cold sleeping alone, her mother was still by her side. She would not be lonely . . . until the day she could understand this contradiction.

The girl waited within the city eternally sealed within falling snow. The promise that she had exchanged with her father was her most valued treasure.

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The sky at sunset was the color of blood. The ground before her eyes was also the color of blood. The corpses slumped on the ground were the people who had once believed in a young girl and supported her as king, offering up to her the songs of victory.

Discord sown by traitors had divided them into two factions; each had seen the other as an enemy and slaughtered, and they had fallen together on this battlefield: King Arthur's final resting place, the foot of Camlann Hill.

Waking from a dream of the other side of space and time, kneeling dejectedly once more atop the bloodstained hill, Arturia blankly gazed at the desolate scene. In order to change this ending, she had entrusted her soul after death to the World; and started a journey in search of a miracle.

She had initially decided not to return here; she had initially believed that she would never see this scene again. But at this moment, the young girl still knelt on this piece of land.

But this was not the ending. This was only one point on the endlessly cyclic path. Released from her contract, the Heroic Spirit Arturia had not set forth for the Throne of Heroes, but had been brought back to this place Camlann, because she had not come to the end of fate's path; It was necessary that she meets her final end here.

In other words, before her summoning as a Servant, she was not a standard Heroic Spirit, one who had taken on the status after death in reality. At the last moment, she had exchanged vows with the World, hoping to obtain the Grail, and the price was to turn her soul into a guardian after death—this was the truth of the Servant named Arturia.

The contract could only be fulfilled only under the condition that the Grail had been obtained. In other words, if Arturia did not obtain the Grail, time would forever stop on this land; forever, where even death cannot be achieved. Before obtaining the Grail, she could only continue to participate in the fight for the Grail on the other side of time. Arturia's time had been frozen in the moment before her death. Unless she obtained the Grail, she could only return again and again to Camlann. Over and over again, this scene would eternally reproach her, torment her.

On the slope of death, she still held the stance with which she had established the contract. Her face covered with tears, gauntlets stained through with the blood of enemies, the lance in her hand piercing the heart of her own flesh and blood—the traitor who had also inherited her own bloodline, the child of tragedy—Mordred. The entanglement of love and hate had caused her to

lose everything, and the scene was fixed at the instant when she killed her own flesh and blood with her own hands—

The instant in which the awareness of the World had come, summoned by wretched and tormented cries, and established the contract with the hero who searched for a miracle—

This was the prison that forever bound Arturia, who had lost her time. Within time that had lost its meaning, within an instant that was equivalent to eternity, she gazed upon the battlefield under the light of dusk, and awaited the next summoning.

She was always right; this she firmly believed in. Still, she had still overlooked the spark that had caused the tragedy before her eyes, just like she had overlooked Lancelot and Guinevere's pain. She could not figure it out, and she did not understand why she could not figure it out—this was the limit of the king Arturia. Could it be that the terrible scene on Camlann was not any trick of fate, but the necessary result of the king Arturia's rule?

"Uu . . ." Unable to stop herself, she began to sob.

She remembered those long and distant days. She remembered the girl who had never paid attention to the men as they contested each other in the noisy arena, and had instead faced, alone, the sword stuck in the stone. At that time, what had she been thinking of? With what kind of resolution had she extended her arm to grip the hilt?

The memories had long since blurred; even though tears obscured her sight, she could not remember. In that case—her mistake must have been made that day.

She let the tears run freely down her face. In this place where time did not run, no matter what she thought or what she did, it

would not be recorded in history. Here, she did not need to bear the title of King. In that case, it mattered not if she showed weakness; it mattered not if she showed shame.

With these thoughts, she faced the ideals that had not been fulfilled; she faced the people who had not been saved. She faced everything that had vanished because she was king.

"... Sorry ..." Though she was choked to the point where she almost could not speak, she still could not control the impulse to apologize. Though she understood that her apology could not be conveyed to anyone's heart, the girl nevertheless repeated her regret.

"I'm sorry ... sorry ... I, someone like me ..."

One day, after stepping over endless battles, she would finally obtain the Grail. A that time, all the mistakes that she had made could be erased through a miracle. As she was now—she should not be called a king.

Before the next summoning, the girl would always—in the instant that was called forever, in the censure that was called eternal rest—weep and regret. Enduring torment in eternal punishment, and feeling cowardice toward sins that could not be repaid.

– 03:11:56

—A vortex started up. Sin, the evil in this world, circulated and multiplied and chained and changed as it whirled into a vortex. Gluttony lust greed depression wrath sloth hypocrisy pride envy, over and over again encroaching and sprouting, whirling into the vortex.

The crime of rebellion the crime of intimidation the crime of adultery the crime of destruction the seven cardinal sins the crime of coercion the crime of theft the crime of desertion the crime of slander the crime of arson the crime of insulting the crime of disrespect the crime of sowing discord the crime of abduction the crime of bribery the crime of abortion the crime of assisting suicide the crime of gambling the crime of abandoning a corpse the crime of mobbing the crime of abandonment the crime of bearing false witness the crime of possessing stolen goods the crime of kidnapping the crime of violence, all crimes should be assessed and sentenced to capital punishment or severe punishment refuse and deny all hatred kill kill kill it is absolutely forbidden kill kill kill he will absolutely not agree kill kill kill very good just like that kill kill kill right that's right kill kill kill promise kill kill kill but no but no what kill kill kill ah it is really boring to have only this one thought—

"—!?"

The vortex of sound that was the curse now circled. There existed something here that should not exist; from within the barrage of denying curses, a voice cried out, "yes!"

Impossible. Affirmations and correctness did not exist within this cursed vortex of hatred. Because everything had determined that everything was ugly and hateful, this word could not appear here—But that voice announced again clearly, "that is right."

That is right. The world was originally already like this. Since the truth has been put before your eyes, why do you sigh? Why are you surprised?

"—!?"

The voice of the curse asked. What was right? Who was there to acknowledge it? Who was there to permit it? And who was to bear the burden of sin?

Facing the bombshell tossed from the darkness—in reply, a resounding and concrete sneer. A foolish question. That goes without asking. The King will acknowledge it; the King will permit it. The King will bear the burden of the entire world.

"—!?"

The mud asked, what is a king? But at the same time it asked the question, it realized it had contradicted itself. In this place that strictly did not allow the existence of entities, the mud had admitted that there was someone else within it. Some strange foreign object that could not exist had appeared here. That was—

King—the presence of an absolute controller, as well as one without equal.

His name was—King of Heroes, Gilgamesh.

"That is I!"

The black mud cracked and dispersed away, leaving flying droplets. The foreign object it could not digest even by mobilizing all its hatred appeared from within the black mud. Within the burning ruins, he once again stood upon the ground. The perfect, golden-proportioned body was no longer the spirit form that it had taken during its time as a Servant, but a true flesh body. The black mud that denied all life crystallized the impurity within itself and then abandoned it, with the result that a certain Heroic Spirit had realized his wish of obtaining a corporeal body and returning to this world.

Even standing right amid a burning hell, the majesty emanating from the body of the king made the surrounding flames afraid to come close. Gilgamesh generously bared his naked statue-like body, sneering impatiently.

"—People actually treated that sort of thing as a wish-granting machine, and fought to the death for it. This round of entertainment has really been frustrating."

But it was not bad like this either—touching the body of flesh that he had received by accident, the King of Heroes felt immensely satisfied.

"Is it Heaven's will that lets me descend like a sovereign upon this time to unite the world again … Humph, the previous

tribulations were really silly. But that's okay too; dissatisfaction is dissatisfaction. I'll just accept reality."

Even though he felt it to be very troublesome, he could not refuse to meet battle since this was the challenge issued to him by the gods. Gilgamesh began to laugh wryly again at his status as the King of Heroes.

Passing through the deep darkness, Kotomine Kirei regained consciousness. He felt the hot air first of all. Then, he smelt the scent of burning human fat. He opened his eyes to look around at the surroundings; the blazing inferno before his eyes seemed to be grilling the sky.

"This place is . . ." He had thought that he had touched that mud and entered the inner world of the Grail again. But as he saw the naked man at his side, he immediately denied this possibility.

"Gilgamesh . . . what happened?"

"You really are a troublesome man. It took me a lot of effort to dig you out from under the rubble."

Kirei diligently operated his dazed brain and began to think, intending to understand how the entire event had happened. His last memory was of the municipal hall's large props storage space; he had been kneeling on the ground, and had been shot from behind and killed by Kiritsugu. He should have lost his life instantly then.

He tore open the vestments at his chest, checking the spot that should have been shot through. The sudden image of black mud surfaced before his eyes.

". . .?"

An illusion. There was no scar on his chest. He pressed his hand atop his heart to check.

"... Did you heal me, Gilgamesh?"

"That ... ah. You did look dead, but you and I are linked by the contract. I received this flesh body because of that mud, so perhaps there is also some reason that you are alive again."

The black mud which had been unable to corrode Archer completely had followed the path of the prana supply that had formerly linked Archer to his Master, arrived at Kotomine Kirei's physical body, and became the source of a life-force supply that could substitute for a heart. Thus had Kirei revived. In other words, now Kirei relied on the prana provided by Angra Mainyu in order to live.

"All the Servants have been eliminated; I am the only one left. Do you know what this means, Kirei?" Kirei, whose mind had still not completely sobered, looked intently into Gilgamesh's red eyes. "It is we who have obtained the Grail, so you only need to open your eyes wide and watch. If the Grail can really make the victor's wish come true, then this scene before you—Kotomine Kirei, it is exactly what you desire."

A crimson hell. The tortured screams that the wind carried to his ears. Dancing tongues of flame. Kirei stared blankly at this scene.

"This is ... my wish?" Exactly. If this thing that was filling the emptiness in his heart at this moment could be called satisfaction ...

"Destruction and sighs ... can make me happy?" Exactly. If the emotion that roiled within his heart at this moment could be

called joy . . . At this moment, Kotomine Kirei finally understood the true form of his own soul. The collapse of everything was so beautiful. People who were tormented were so lovable. Tortured screams by his ears were so satisfying. Burnt corpses were so laughable.

". . . Haha." Unable to control the emotion that had reached boiling point, Kirei laughed hopelessly. What kind of sin was this? What a cruel demon he was. A world like this, cast aside by God, could actually be filled with vivid joy. "What am I? Hahaha, what am I?!"

Even the feeling of hopelessness that tugged at his heart was so sweet. Kirei's body trembled from his manic laughter. He could feel everything from his fingertips to the top of his head, clearly and distinctly.

Ahah, now I am alive. I truly exist, right here. For the first time, he was aware of, and for the first time he truly felt, the fetters between him and the world.

"Why so twisted? Why so filthy? Am I really the descendant of Kotomine Risei? Hahahaha, impossible! Impossible! What is this?! Could my father really have sired a dog?!"

From a place completely in opposition to his own faith, Kirei had found the truth. This ironic end was so satisfying. He had circled so many winding roads. Had he been dreaming all along? He had praised the preciousness of kindness, sang hymns to the beauty of holiness. Kirei had wasted twenty-odd years of his life precisely because he believed utterly in this sort of truth. He had never realized that his nature was completely contrary to this sort of truth.

"—Satisfied, Kirei?" The priest clutched his stomach, exhausted and breathing rapidly from his laughter; Gilgamesh asked in a calm voice.

"No, not enough. Just this is not enough." Kirei wiped away the tears from his maniacal laughter, and shook his head. "True—I have finally found my answer in this life that is full of question marks. This is a very great improvement. However, this doesn't solve any problems. I only bypassed the process and method of solving the question to arrive directly at the answer. Just like that, how will you have me acknowledge it, and even then what is there for me to acknowledge?"

If God is the Creator of All Things, then to all souls, happiness is truth. But now, there truly existed a soul that had turned its back on morality and yet obtained happiness. Kirei had also only just begun to believe that this soul was no one else but himself. In that case, the definition of good and evil, as well as the very existence of truth, had created a contradiction. This contradiction could not be overlooked.

"Within the equation from which this strange answer is derived, there should exist a reason that is simple and easily understood. No, there is definitely one. Then what exactly is it . . . ? I must clarify it, I must find it. Even if it takes my whole life, I want to understand."

Having had enough of insane laughter, a smile remained on his mournful face, like a residue of his previous manic laughter. Perhaps from today on, he would always keep this expression. The leisurely smile that meant that he had accepted the truth of himself and the world, and was able to honestly face everything.

Facing Kotomine Kirei's completely new bearing, Gilgamesh nodded and said.

"You really don't feel fed up ... That's all right too. I, Gilgamesh, will see how you will carry through your fearless faith in the pursuit of your way."

Kirei looked around at the surroundings again, savoring the exquisitely beautiful scenery that the Grail had brought to him. The quantity of the black mud that had caused the entire block to go up in flames should be nothing compared to the quantity which remained in the Great Grail. When that mud was all released, what kind of hellish picture would unfold before his eyes?

Yes—its existence was like Kirei's own; they were both things running contrary to ethicality. Now that Kirei thought about it, there had already been anticipation in his heart from the time that he had seen that dream world. If such a *thing* had really been born and proved its existence, then perhaps it could even derive some other explanation that was unrelated to morals and ethics.

"Angra, Mainyu—" Thinking somewhat anxiously, Kirei spat out this name. He must find it again; he must witness it again with his own eyes, its birth, and the value of its existence.

Suddenly, Kirei discovered that another silhouette had appeared on the other side of the wavering tongues of flames. His cloak, fanned out by the hot air, was tattered in many places, stained black in many places. That person walked as unsteadily as a sleepwalker, and wandered on the burning street.

He was Emiya Kiritsugu. It was not clear how he came to be there, but judging from his current appearance, it seemed he had lost Saber and had luckily survived the big fire. What did not

match with the steps that had no majesty left was the terrifying manner with which he surveyed the surroundings, like that of the vengeful dead who wailed as they wandered in burning hell. He was clearly looking for something, and in order to find it he was not afraid even to die within the sea of flame. Could he have discovered that he had not succeeded in killing Kirei, and thus pursued him here—?

As he was thinking this, their eyes met. Kirei unflinchingly received his empty gaze. "Then I shall meet battle—"

Although the injuries to his right hand and left leg were still there, at this moment Kirei did not think that he would lose. He remembered again the dissatisfaction when the outcome of the previous battle had been decided. He would not let the matter drop until he taught the other man a lesson.

But things did not progress as Kirei had expected. It was as if Kirei was transparent in Kiritsugu's eyes; as if nothing had happened, Kiritsugu moved his gaze away and continued to size up the surroundings, leaving aimlessly and without a destination. The wet blanket thrown on his eager fighting spirit, Kirei discovered that there was an unspeakable gloominess in his heart.

"Nn? What is it, Kirei?" It seemed Gilgamesh had not noticed Kiritsugu at all. Kirei silently shook his head, and considered it his answer to the King of Heroes.

Emiya Kiritsugu's expression was clearly odd. His once-sharp gaze had vanished; his eyes were now like empty caves, devoid of expression. JUdging by the distracted impression he gave, he would not have recognized things right before his eyes. Perhaps he had not even noticed Kirei watching him. He had become a

walking corpse, not worth treating as an enemy anymore. Kiritsugu, who had wanted to save others but instead brought about disaster, was the loser in the true meaning of the word. He must be searching for survivors to give him some comfort; absolute foolishness. In his current state, he would very quickly vanish in this sea of fire. There was no need to think about it anymore; this person no longer held any meaning for Kirei now.

Kirei thus justified to himself in his heart; at the same time, he cast gloominess aside. Even if he had really become a walking zombie, even if he was only a corpse; even then, Emiya Kiritsugu had actually ignored Kotomine Kirei and walked away on his own. This fact made him feel utterly humiliated.

– 01:03:14

Sometimes, a broken machine does not simply and silently stop functioning. On rare occasions, it could surprisingly continue working. That Kariya was able to crawl back to the Matou mansion in Miyama was one of these rare examples.

In fact, Kariya's physical body itself had been in a very dangerous state for the past few months. Had he not been driven forcibly by the prana that had been concentrated by the Crest worms, he would not have been able to move. Moreover, in the condition that the Crest Worms had died under the heavy burden of Berserker's rampage, Kariya should only have been able to quietly wait for death to come.

But even so, Kariya had stood up from the ground of the basement and escaped the municipal hall that was close to collapsing. He crossed the burning streets and walked the long night road across Fuyuki city. This was a miracle fulfilled without help from the Holy Grail.

However, right now, Kariya was in no condition to realize how rare such cases were, and was likewise unable to give thanks for the pity God had shown him. He had long forgotten what time it was, and his mind had been muddled for a long time. He could not even recall properly how he had escaped tonight. The heavily damaged body could fall down any minute, and even his psyche had been eroded to its limits. Only the conviction of saving Sakura enabled Kariya to force himself here.

Standing before that familiar stairwell, full of a rancid and rotten stench, Kariya finally relaxed as he faced the mass of darkness below. Sakura was locked beneath those stairs, deep in the darkness of the basement. A little bit more, just a little bit more to go. Just like he had expected; no one hindered his movements. Zouken, who had been monitoring Kariya's actions through the Crest worms, must have thought Kariya dead a long time ago. For Kariya, who was lying in wait for an opportunity, this was a chance that could not be missed. The worms within Kariya had died, killed by Berserker. They had admitted defeat before Kariya; Kariya had defeated the worms. This time—this time he must be able to rescue the imprisoned Sakura, and escape with her.

Kariya walked down the stairs. Although he could not determine whether he was walking or crawling—or even just rolling down the stairs—he knew he was advancing downwards. The ruckus of the worms sounded by his ears; they were angry at the presence of the intruder. He must hurry, must finish his work before Zouken discovered it. The young and small silhouette of a girl appeared deep within the darkness. Like always, Sakura had been violated and consumed by the Worms tonight. Her lost and empty gaze suddenly focused upon Kariya, who was approaching her.

"... Uncle ...?"

"Sakura—I'm here to save you. It's, it's all right—" He finally voiced this confession. He had waited far too long for this moment. *You need not despair anymore, you need not give anything up anymore. The nightmare is over, and it will not*

return. He took off the handcuffs and shackles that tightly bound the young girl's soft skin. *Go, Sakura, go and take back the future that you should have.*

Kariya took Sakura's hand and left the worm storage room, then silently and inconspicuously crossed the Miyama district at night. Aoi and Rin were waiting for them in the next town. The mother would finally be finally reunited with her daughter in that memorable courtyard in the Zenjou mansion.

He would bring all three of them travelling, to a place no one knew about, where no one would disturb them. There, they would pass each day in happiness. They would play games happily, like they had once promised. Aoi would watch her two daughters running in a field of flowers with a smile on her face. Sakura would pluck clovers as Rin wove them into garlands. They would fight for the chance to place the garland on Kariya's head, saying they want to give the garland to Daddy as a gift. Aoi, wearing two garlands, would grasp Kariya's hand tightly as she smiled.*Ahh, thank you.* Kariya would laugh and cry at the same time, taking his beloved wife and daughters into a tight embrace. *Daddy is so happy to have such a wife and such daughters. He is the happiest person in the world. There was nothing to regret. All this was worth risking his life for. The pain he had suffered would be rewarded, and all that he had wanted were in his grasp—*

■■■■■

Sakura stared at the corpse of the man who had collapsed before her in the icy-cold darkness of the worm storage. This man was

muttering to himself even till the end, a satisfied smile on his face at his death.

How odd. Why would this man return here? Why did he still want to live in such a despicable state? Although Sakura could not understand, she clearly knew why he was in anguish, and why he was dead.

—*You must not disobey Grandfather.* Everyone in the Makiri house knew that, but why would this man not obey that rule? He was an adult, but a helplessly stupid one. Why, why would this man choose such a meaningless death?

After a brief consideration—*ahh, that was why.* Sakura suddenly understood it. This must be her lesson tonight. A lesson to teach her what would happen to those who disobeyed Grandfather's will. This man died here so Sakura could see a real example with her own eyes.

Yes, I understand, Grandfather. The girl nodded obediently. She burned this scene deep into her memory as she stared, unmoving, at the worm-surrounded corpse that was gradually becoming smaller and smaller.

– 00:00:00

Before he realized it, he was on a burnt field. Some kind of large fire had broken out. The cityscape he was familiar with had turned to ruins, like the scars of battlefields that you see in films.

When dawn broke, the course of the fire weakened. The wall of flame which had been so high now sank, and the buildings had mostly crumbled. It was a wondrous feeling to be the only thing in all this to remain in his original form. He was the only living thing around. Was he very lucky, or was his house built in a very lucky place? He could not tell, but in any case, he was the only one alive.

I lived on, so I have to keep living—was what he thought. It would be dangerous to stay here indefinitely—so he walked on aimlessly. But it was not because he could not stand being burnt black like the people who had collapsed around him. . . . Most likely, there was a feeling which bound his heart, a feeling stronger than the wish to not end up like them.

Even so, he held nothing like hope. It was a wonder that he had lived up to this point; he did not think that he would be saved now. To begin with, he could not be saved. No matter what he did, he cannot possibly leave this crimson world. It was so absolute a hell that even a young child was able to comprehend it. And so he fell.

Perhaps there was no oxygen; perhaps he had already lost the function of taking in oxygen. At any rate, he fell, gazing at the

sky which was beginning to cloud over. There were the human figures around him, burnt black and quite shrunken. Dark clouds covered the sky, telling him that rain will fall soon. . . . That would be good. The fire would end if rain fell.

At the end, with a deep breath, he looked up at the rain clouds. He could no longer breathe. *Just—it's so . . . painful.* He spoke with frank emotion for the people who could no longer complain. It was just so painful. Living was painful. So much so that he even thought he might as well just disappear now and be at ease. With a hazy consciousness, he meaninglessly stretched out his hand—not for salvation . . . the sky was so . . . far. He simply thought that in his final moment.

And thus, his consciousness disappeared, and the raised hand suddenly fell, caught by a large hand before it touched the ground.

. . . He remembered that face . . . The figure of the man who was joyous from the bottom of his heart at finding a living human being, tears amassing in his eyes. He looked so very delighted, as though the one being saved was not the boy, but this man.

And so, speaking in envy of him who stood at death's edge, the man said *thank you,* expressing gratitude for . . . something. *Thank you,* for letting me find this. Expressing gratitude to someone for letting him help and save just one person—his smile could not be surpassed.

Epilogue

The next day

EVERY news channel on TV was reporting on the large fire that had taken place in Shinto last night. But that notwithstanding, gloom was cast over breakfast at the MacKenzies'.

The table seemed rather empty with one less person. The male guest who had been boarding in the house for some time had left for his home country the previous day due to some urgent issue. He had asked Waver to thank the MacKenzies for their hospitality and care in recent days, and apologized very much for not bidding them farewell in the face of his sudden departure.

"Alex must have safely returned to the UK, right?" Martha MacKenzie murmured with a worried look. Waver nodded to calm her.

"He called me back from the airport this morning. That guy, doesn't he know anything about local time differences?" Waver told this massive lie with a poker face, astonishing himself with his ability to lie so easily and simply.

"He called you? I really didn't notice. Ah, but that kind of style really suits him." With a nod and a smile on her face, Martha turned her gaze back to the TV screen, and then looked gloomy again. "... That's still quite unfortunate, but then again, there have indeed been a lot of disturbances lately. But maybe that's not a bad thing either. At least those insincere visitors might change their itinerary now."

Looking at the screen and the totally burned and barren field it showed, Waver could not help but feel deeply ashamed. The fire that had occurred close to the Municipal Hall was undoubtedly caused by the War of the Holy Grail. Although he did not know which one out of the three remaining Masters and Servants had created this tragic scene, he and Rider might have prevented this incident had they been present. That was why he found it difficult to suppress his deep regret.

This tragedy would not occur in the future. Though it ended in the worst way possible, the alien events that threatened Fuyuki would not occur again. The fourth War of the Holy Grail, which had sacrificed countless innocent lives, had been put to a complete end last night. Remembering the tragedy that had taken place back there, he felt that it could already be considered a miracle that he was still alive.

"Umm, Grandpa, Grandma, may I discuss something with you?"

Hearing Waver's voice, which sounded different from usual, the old couple placed their coffee cups down. "What is it?"

"Ah, actually ... I want to take a break from school for a while. This is a decision I made after discussing it with Father back in

Toronto. Rather than going to school, at this time I'd like to do something else first."

"Oh."

"Ahhh."

Hearing this surprising declaration from their grandson, the old couple could not help but stare at each other, and at him.

"But why all of a sudden . . . You don't hate going to school, right?"

"No, not at all . . . But so far, I have not had any interest in anything at all besides studying, which makes me kind of regretful. So . . . ah, I want to travel. I want to visit the outside world, so I can understand more things before I decide what to do with my life."

"Really?" Martha seemed to be very glad, and smiled while clapping her hands together. "Did you hear that, Glen? Our Waver actually said something that sounds like what Alex would say."

At this evaluation, with some relief and a slight pang of loneliness, Waver smiled bitterly.

"Anyway, there're a lot of things you should prepare beforehand. It's vital to prepare well. Do you want to start by finding a job? . . . Ah, but here's a problem. You can't get a job in Fuyuki if you can't speak Japanese, right?"

Hmm . . . Glen crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked deep in thought. "There are also a lot of foreigners in this town. If I beg some of my acquaintances, maybe they can find you a solution."

"So Waver, will you stay in Japan for a while?"

Looking at Martha, who was wearing such a happy expression, Waver nodded. "Ah, if it's all right . . . If it's not too much trouble for you . . .?"

"Of course not!" Martha was so happy that she almost jumped with joy, and could not resist clapping as she replied. Her husband, Glen, just sat in silence next to her, but gave Waver a look of trust and expectation. The boy also sat up with his back straight and returned a solemn look.

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Waver returned to his room alone, reviewing it in the light of the dawn. Eleven days—it was such a short time, but this room was already dyed with the shade of the person who had lived there. There were old magazines, paper dinner bags that he had thrown everywhere, and an empty whiskey bottle that had rolled into the corner. They were all traces of the other person who had eaten and drunk and rested in this room. This was a shade that did not belong to Waver.

Was he a ghost? Or a familiar? Pondering all that nonsense, Waver wondered. This was not a joke. If it was just a soul, how was it possible that such a vivid color still lingered in the room?

However, this room would be no longer be dyed in this shade. From now on, there would be only one person living here, and that was Waver. It would only be stained with Waver's personality and his presence. The previous shade would eventually be erased. It was inevitable, regrettable, lonely. But,

certainly, the color that covers it must be extraordinarily vivid. Only then could it cover *his* shade, brighter than anyone else.

Waver sat down on the bed and pulled out the collector's edition of The Iliad from his backpack. It had only been eleven short days, but the pages were already darkening with repeated readings. The face of that eternally smiling man seemed to emerge before him again when he looked at this book, which he felt difficult to understand no matter how many times he read it. That man who had pushed himself forward with the adventures of the hero Achilles, who had challenged his own limits and finally made his own life into a legend.

Such a man had once been at Waver's side, and had lived and fought with him. Those dream-like scenes he had described to Waver felt almost like lies. However, in the end, Waver was still attracted to his happiness. He could not deny that he envied him. He had even thought of going together with him.

But he had left Waver behind after all. He made that decision the moment he invited Waver to become his subordinate and received Waver's reply. Did that man make a wrong decision because of Waver's wrong reply back then?—"Why are you talking about nonsense like subordination! Are we not friends? If you're going to battle, of course I'll accompany you!"

If only Waver had been able to say those words in the wind back then, say those words as if they were equals … *he* would definitely have smiled knowingly, and perhaps would have allowed Waver to mount his war horse in the end.

"But … Most importantly, in the end, I never showed him my unwillingness …" Waver could not help sighing. He was still far

from standing on equal terms with that man. His own weaknesses were still exposed in the end. He regretted, and thought it a pity. Perhaps he was just too proud. But he was not anxious. After all, Waver had not yet reached the age at which that man began his journey, and the marks of that man's blood-boiling and amazing adventures could still be seen in every corner of this world. Waver would seek that out. Perhaps, one day, he would find the footprints of that man in some place beyond that distant sea.

Suddenly, Waver's gaze landed on the paper bag beside the television. Come to think of it, that guy had bought this stuff so happily, but had left without even taking it out of its packaging. Waver opened the bag and removed the gaming console and the disk within. He had even bought a joystick. Feeling his eyes suddenly hot with tears, Waver forced them down.

"... I will not play this silly stuff."

But he had just decided to try new things, and one was right in front of him. It was silly, but worth a try. Yet, was this kind of stuff really that interesting? Waver frowned as he looked at the bag, then began following the instructions to connect the video game to the TV set.

Half a year later

"—I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the end he will stand upon the earth."

A funeral procession proceeded alone in the icy-cold rain, managed by a young girl. No expression of sorrow or anxiety was written on her, but she numbly executed the procedure of the funeral. While this expression made those who came to mourn feel her strength, none of them held any feeling of pity toward her. It was a funeral for a high-born clan. For elders, children who grew up under such a strict education should be able to bear anything. The mourners sitting here all held the same belief.

"And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me . . . Amen." Then the coffin was buried into the earth. With some words of prayer from the others, the mourners left one by one. In the rain that once again regained its silence, only the young girl who took charge of the funeral and the priest who led the ceremonies were left.

"Good work. It was a very splendid debut for the next family head. I believe your father would be proud too."

Rin just nodded in silence at those words of praise. Her left wrist had already been carved with the Magic Crest of the Tousaka family. Her body, still not used to the Crest that had only recently been grafted, hurt from it. But there was no sign of agony shown on the young girl's face, and she endured the

funeral to the very last. Indeed, this willpower of hers ill-matched her age.

The letter that Tokiomi wrote, which entrusted everything to the Association after his death, was almost perfect; it was truly a real portrait of the man himself. The transfer of the body and the extraction of the Crest were all entrusted to the Association's headquarters in London by Kotomine Kirei, Rin's guardian. The Crest was handed to Tokiomi's friends to be guarded securely, ensuring its impeccable transplanting to Rin's body in the future.

Transplanting a Crest into someone puts great burden on the body; it was best to transplant it into the family successor before his or her secondary sexual characteristics had developed completely. However, when the previous family head suddenly passes away, many unexpected difficulties would be encountered. But Tokiomi had overcome this and made impeccable preparations. He had passed the essence of magecraft that the Tousaka house had complied over the generations all unto Rin without omitting anything.

However, due to the numerous procedures involved in the transport of the body and the removal of the Crest, over six months had passed before Tokiomi's body was returned home. Those who attended the funeral procession today were only the few who knew the truth of his death, completely unrelated to the prestige and achievements the family had achieved in its homeland. A lonely funeral like this is probably the burden one must bear as a magus.

Kirei looked around the suddenly desolate cemetery, and turned to meet the taxi that waited at the back.

"It's about time to let Mother come out, right?"

"—Mm, it's about time."

Tousaka Aoi, who was supposed to organize the funeral as the widow, was unable to appear before the guests due to her health condition, which required her to stay in bed. Although reluctant to let her come into contact with outsiders, Rin still wanted her mother to meet her father one last time before the coffin was to be buried beneath the earth.

She had been waiting for her mother's arrival before the other mourners arrived. She walked toward the car, helped her mother onto the wheelchair, and pushed it toward Tokiomi's grave. The widow in the wheelchair still looked very young and beautiful, but nary an expression showed on her face, only a hazy, dreamy stare into the void.

"Mother, here, say a final goodbye to Father." At Rin's urging, Aoi's dreamy eyes finally gathered slowly on one spot on the ground. Her eyes slowly swept around the gravestones surrounding her, and opened her eyes wide as if having finally realized something.

"Ah—What, Rin? Is it someone's funeral today?"

"Yes. Father passed away."

"Oh my goodness! I'll have to hurry and take out Tokiomi's funeral clothes — Rin, go help Sakura get dressed. Ahhh what to do what to do? I haven't prepared anything . . ." Aoi, who was sitting on a wheelchair, sank into a brief panic. Then, she suddenly bent down like a marionette with its strings broken. Moreover, when she finally lifted her head up again, she showed a gentle

smile toward the empty air before her, and stretched out her fingers in front of her.

"See, my dear, your tie is skewed again. And there's a string sticking to your shoulder. Haha, try to cheer up a bit. After all, you're the father that Rin and Sakura are proud of . . ." Aoi prattled on and on to the husband that only she could see. Meanwhile, Rin simply stayed by her mother's side and guarded her in silence.

Tousaka Aoi, who had suffered brain damage as a result of oxygen deprivation, was unable to communicate properly with Kirei and Rin anymore. For Rin, Aoi had been an innocent victim swept up into the fourth Heaven's Feel, just like her father.

For Aoi, who was no longer able to correctly comprehend reality, perhaps this was a happier end. Her heart remained in those times when Sakura was still in the house and Tokiomi was still alive. She wandered in the spacious Tousaka mansion, conversed and laughed with the husband and younger daughter in her memories, and lived on forever in the beautiful dream of a happy family.

Rin was left behind in the real world by herself. She took care of such a mother, but could only look at her silently, unable to move a single step into that happy picture. She hid the sadness that no one else could feel, bore the heavy burden of being the head of a magecraft clan upon her young body, and endured the pain of the Crest. It was truly too cruel a fate for a young girl who was only an elementary school student.

Kotomine Kirei, however, thought that it was an incomparably good strike of luck that he was made the guardian of such a tragic

girl. He could only feel joy through the other's pain and suffering. To Kirei, who had known his twisted true colors a long time ago, Rin's current predicament was undoubtedly the best environment to make her grow into a sentimental girl. Kirei would be able to appraise everything up close; undoubtedly an enjoyment comparable to tasting the most outstanding wine.

However—what angered him was the fact that he had never received such rewards. Though she was burdened with this tragic fate, the young girl did not shed a single tear. Not a word of weakness was ever uttered. Even now, before her pitiful mother who could not comprehend her father's passing, Rin still kept a calm look. She forcibly suppressed her sorrow and grief inside her heart, and waited for her mother to calm down. This situation was one that other children of her age, spoiled to uselessness by their parents, would never have been able to endure.

Rin had already acknowledged and accepted her fate, and was courageous enough to boldly face it. Such rare pride and self-control were the greatest virtues possessed by the young girl named Tousaka Rin, but it angered Kirei most. Having tasted her fill of bitterness and pain, this jewel named Rin began to take on shape from the unshaped raw ore. He had originally thought that seeing the shameful behavior of her beloved mother would wound her soul, but did not expect her to accept her mother's weakness to enthralling dreams with a merciful and accommodating heart.

This young girl was advancing step by step on the heretic road of magecraft. Perhaps one day she would become just like her father, discarding all the twisted evil of a magus and forming a most righteous and balanced personality. Of course, that would be

the most boring development for Kirei. He had originally expected to see what kind of a twisted flower Tokiomi's daughter would bloom into.

Keeping these secrets in his heart, Kirei placed his hand on Rin's shoulders as if encouraging her. "I will stay in Japan for some time . . . Is there anything else you're worried about for the future?"

". . . Nothing much. I've been too much of a trouble for you, but now it's fine." The young girl answered with a tough tone, not even looking at Kirei.

Rin obeyed her father's last words, and did not object to having Kotomine Kirei become her guardian. However, she found it difficult to conceal her spite toward him. He was Tokiomi's assistant, headed into the same battlefield, but in the end had failed to protect Tokiomi. Rin's heart was still angry and suspicious toward Kirei to this day.

Kirei only felt Rin's inexperienced hatred to be laughable. What would the expression on this girl's face be when she one day came to know the truth? He looked forward to seeing it.

"We will meet again in six months. The second Crest transplantation process can be performed then. Please take care of yourself."

". . . You don't have to say a word. I already know."

"I think that I will be mainly working overseas in the future. I'm terribly sorry to say this, but I think I cannot live in Japan. I am truly unsuitable to be a guardian . . ."

"One cannot help being busy. Of course, I will take good care of Mother and the Tousaka family while you're gone. Go on your

crusades against heretics or do whatever you like, as long as you don't bring us trouble."

Hah, even Rin can bluff like this? Her tone today was sharper than usual. Perhaps today really was more painful than ever for this girl. A rather sickening idea suddenly flashed through Kirei's mind.

"—Rin, you will be the true Head of the Tousaka house henceforth. For this special occasion, I have a gift for you." As he said that, Kirei pulled out a dagger from within his coat together with its sheath. This was the same Azoth Sword that was given to him by Tokiomi as a symbol of friendship. Today's funeral made Kirei remember the man who had passed away, and he had brought the dagger along. It was also a little compensation for the man who had died by his hand.

"This is what I received from Master Tokiomi in the past when he recognized the achievements of my magecraft studies—I think it's better that you take care of it from now on."

Rin took the dagger, pulled the blade from its sheath, and studied it carefully. She caressed the leather of the hilt and the magecraft runes on the blade almost reverently, as if she could feel the warmth of her father's fingers within.

"... Father ..."

A small ripple suddenly appeared on the dagger that the girl held in her hands—a single teardrop suddenly tumbled down the immaculate blade. This was the first time that Rin had shed tears in front of Kirei. Tasted the wine he had been waiting for too long, Kirei's heart shook with joy.

Rin knew nothing. The dagger she held in her hand, receiving her tears, was once fully stained with the fresh blood that poured from Tokiomi's heart. Perhaps she would even consider this dagger as a memento of her memorable father and deferentially treasure it in the future . . . if she never found out that this was the murder weapon that killed her father.

This extreme irony and the pleasure of violating a pure heart brought Kotomine Kirei insurmountable satisfaction. Rin, crying with her head lowered, was completely ignorant to the priest beside her, whose heart was blossoming in a silent smile. She only held on tightly to the dagger of fate in her hands.

Five years later

It was a night with a beautiful moon. Emiya Kiritsugu gazed out at the moon as he silently stood by the window. Though already winter, it was not very cold; just enough for the skin to prickle in the slight night chill; ideal weather for moon-gazing. The boy sitting beside him gazed quietly at the moon with Kiritsugu. His name was Shirou. He was the only existence Kiritsugu had managed to save from the fire that took everything of his.

It had been five years since. Shirou, who was a kid then, was gradually growing up.

Kiritsugu had adopted Shirou, who had no one left to rely on due to the fire, and managed to barely live on after tidying up the ruined house with the storage room which Irisviel had bought. As for why he did that—even he himself did not know. He had nowhere else to go. Had he also no more reason to live on? All the goals and beliefs the man named Emiya Kiritsugu had once possessed were burnt to ashes in that fire. What returned from that barren field was simply a corpse with a beating heart.

Had he not saved Shirou, Kiritsugu would truly be dead a long time ago. But he met this child who had fortunately escaped from the raging fire which claimed innumerable lives. That was the miracle which brought him back from the shell known as Emiya Kiritsugu. Were he to look back on it now, it would be considered a very wondrous life.

The man who had lost his wife and daughter was once again a father. The child who had lost his parents was once again a son. Now that he thought about it, he had repeated this unchanging life day after day. Shirou was now calling Kiritsugu 'old man' before the latter had even hit forty years of age. Maybe the kid felt it was more natural that way. But the truth was that the stamina still lingering within Kiritsugu's body was nothing more than a spluttering candle in the wind. In truth, he was not much different from an old man after all.

Since then, he peacefully and calmly passed his days, as if living the dream of another man. On that day five years ago, a line had been drawn across the page of his life bereft of everything. Since then, no one had disappeared before Kiritsugu's eyes. Shirou, Taiga, Raiga or, the youngsters in the Fujimura Group—none of them had left him since they met, and they were still together even now. The meetings he used to have with other people were simply the beginning of separation.

However, such a happiness was not without reason. The things that he had lost in the past would never return.

Kiritsugu had repeatedly used the excuse of traveling overseas to get Shirou to stay home while he traveled to the Einsberns. He wanted to save his daughter, who had been left all alone within the City of Winter.

However, no matter how obstinately Kiritsugu repeated his visits, Jubstacheit was still unwilling to open the forest's bounded

field. That was understandable. All the efforts the Einsberns put into the fourth Heaven's Feel came to nought because of Kiritsugu's betrayal at the last moment. A man like Kiritsugu would have to remain silent even if he was punished, but Acht did not do that. Did he want to put the traitor to exile like a stray dog and let it struggle on its last legs, carrying that shameful title for the rest of its life? Or did he plan to let Kiritsugu never see his daughter again, exacting the most severe punishment possible? Whichever the case, it was already fact.

Had he been the Kiritsugu of the past, the infamous Magus Killer, he might have been able to forcibly break through this icy bounded field and rush to his daughter's side. However, Kiritsugu had been touched by Angra Mainyu and corroded by the curse. His flesh grew ever weaker, his limbs atrophied, his sight began to fade, and he had completely lost the ability to use magecraft; he was not much different from a terminally ill patient now. He could not even find the initiating point of the bounded field, and could only wander in the blizzard, waiting until death.

He understood that his attempts had been in vain—recently, Kiritsugu had already faintly felt that his time was probably up. Cursed by the black mud, he probably did not have much time left. With this knowledge, he had recently been staying home all the time, immersed in memories as he passed time in a daze.

What had his life been about—? As he thought of this, he silently gazed up at the moon with Shirou.

"... When I was a kid, I used to want to be a hero of justice very much," he muttered unconsciously, suddenly. Like a shipwreck sunken beneath the surface long ago, those untouched

and forgotten words suddenly escaped from his lips—that was right. He seemed to have said something like that to someone else some time ago, although he had not managed to fulfill it in the end. But when did that happen?

At Kiritsugu's utterance, Shirou suddenly showed his displeasure. "What? You used to want to—have you given up now?"

The boy harbored deep admiration for Kiritsugu, and hated hearing Kiritsugu speak words of such self-deprecation. Kiritsugu often felt extremely ashamed at this sentiment; the boy thought his foster father an incomparably great man, but did not understand Emiya Kiritsugu's past, including that disaster which made him lose everything. He simply and merely made Kiritsugu a goal to be admired.

The spirit of self-sacrifice and sense of justice Shirou held in his heart were so great, it almost seemed twisted, and this was displayed in the extreme respect and admiration he showed to Kiritsugu. That was also his only regret in the days which father and the son spent together—Shirou wished to become Kiritsugu. He wanted to follow the road Kiritsugu walked. Although Kiritsugu wanted to tell him how foolish such an idea was, he did not manage to say it.

If Shirou lived like Kiritsugu and headed toward destruction like he did, these five peaceful years of life would become a curse at the end as well. *Is your aspiration still there?* Shirou questioned back. This made Kiritsugu's heart ache—*that's right, how wonderful it would be if it could gradually disappear with the passage of time!*

Kiritsugu pretended to gaze out toward the distant moon, hiding the sorrowful memories with a bitter smile. "Hmm, it is rather regrettable. Heroes have a time limit too, and it's hard to fulfill once you become an adult. It would have been better if I realized that earlier."

Had he realized it earlier, he would not have been tricked by the sweet lie of miracles waving the banner of dreams. Kiritsugu had once released a demon powerful enough to destroy the world because of his aspirations. It was too late when he finally realized his mistake. Countless people had died because of it, including Shirou's own father and mother. That harbinger of Hell was still lurking beneath Mount Enzou even now. After that battle, Kiritsugu had repeatedly visited that place with dynamite, spending years mapping out a few leylines. He had meticulously created a bump at a location leading toward Mount Enzou. That might be his last time using magecraft.

The prana produced at the junction of numerous leylines will collect at that bump over time. When its limit is reached, a localized earthquake would be triggered deep within Mount Enzou. It would take between thirty to forty years for the bump to break. If his calculations were correct, the cavern within Mount Enzou would collapse and seal away the Greater Grail forever. Though he would not live to see that day, Kiritsugu had done the best he could to prevent the fifth Heaven's Feel sixty years later.

Shirou seemed guided into deep contemplation by Kiritsugu's casual words. However, accepting Kiritsugu's viewpoint, he answered with a nod. "Really? Then there's really nothing you can do."

"It's true. I'm really powerless." Kiritsugu also answered with a slight hint of heartfelt pain. *There is nothing you can do*—there was little lament or sorrow in that phrase. Kiritsugu gazed up at the night sky. "—Ahh, what a beautiful moon—"

It seemed like the only night of his life with such a beautiful moon, and Kiritsugu was overjoyed to share such a beautiful memory with Shirou.

"Hmm. If you can't fulfill it anymore, let me fulfill it for you." On that elegant night, the youth casually promised to achieve something Kiritsugu had longed for, but could not fulfill, in his place. In that moment, Kiritsugu remembered. He too had made a promise like this. He too had said something similar to someone more important than any other. Back then, he had firmly believed that the things in his heart will never be lost. But that confidence had been forgotten until a moment ago.

"Dad is an adult already; perhaps there's nothing you can do now. But I'm all right. Entrust it to me, entrust Dad's dream—" Shirou kept saying those words which sounded like a promise. His words, enhanced by the night view, became an unforgettable memory carved into Kiritsugu's heart. Under such a beautiful moon, he would never forget. Emiya Shirou's very first thought and this precious and innocent prayer would definitely became a most beautiful memory forever retained in his heart.

Had the boy really inherited his foolish father's dream, he would probably begin an endless lament and experience bottomless despair. But he would definitely be able to recall his self at this moment as long as he remembered this night. He would remember this heart his young self had; this fearless heart,

unknown to sorrow, full of aspiration. That would also be the salvation that Kiritsugu, who had lost himself unknowingly, grinded little by little over time, hoped for.

"Yes. Ahh—then I'll be at peace now."

Even if Shirou walked the same path as him, he would never become the same man. All the scars in his heart seemed to have healed when he understood this. Emiya Kiritsugu closed his eyes.

And thus this man, who accomplished nothing in his life and won not a single victory, stopped breathing. His last moments were full of relief, and he passed away as in a mere sleep.

—Kerry, what kind of a man would you like to become?

She asked under the dazzling sunlight. He would never forget her smile and her gentleness. This world is so beautiful. How he wished that time would forever be stopped in this beautiful moment. As he thought this, he voiced his promise, unaware: *I'll never forget what I felt today.*

—I want to be a hero of justice!

~Fin~

Postface

Urobuchi Gen

Is the re-creation of a so-called established work a good or a bad thing? To be made into animation, or a game, or a novel; a sequel, a spinoff . . . I had once jumped for joy when I heard such news about my beloved work.
During my childhood, I had also greatly looked forward to another meeting with my beloved characters; I looked forward to seeing their heroics again. Until today, these remembrances are all treasures from the bottom of my heart.

But after stepping over the threshold of the new century, when I heard this sort of information about my beloved work, I always furrowed my brow, and my heart was always full of unease. Of course, sometimes this unease proves to be just paranoia. I also obtained many additional beautiful experiences from those sequels. But what is undeniable is that in many cases, all I feel is disappointment, depression and the incomparable indignation of having the precious memories of your heart tarnished.

This so-called re-creation—is it a good or a bad thing? The wish that it is good still echoes in the bottom of my heart until today. That feeling in the past, of hoping that the story would never end—I have not forgotten it to this day.

But, 'feeling' is calling out loudly 'no'. Definitely nothing good can come out of this. The new producers only borrowed the repute of the original and used it to make money—that is all. The appraisal and reputation will all be shared equally with the original author regardless of whether the sequel is good or bad. In that case, who would be willing to pour their enthusiasm into the work? As long as the quality is passable, just sell a large quantity while the media is still stirring—this sort of situation has already repeated itself countless times. Now, what reason is there to let me optimistically believe that this wish will definitely be communicated to the other party? 'Yes', 'reason' very unwillingly says. It is hopeless.

Now, the otaku entertainment form that includes animation, games and light novels is currently producing large amounts of profit as an industry—yes, it is already an industry. Marketing principles are driving the cycle of supply and demand in endless acceleration. In this system where the ideal is that the producer's benefit is paramount, and there is a continuous supply of consumers, it is extremely foolish to proclaim a work finished when it exists only as a single commodity. A limited number of ideas, in the process of being turned into games, animation, comics, light novels or even made into figurines, from re-releases, to repackages, to anthologies, re-translations and remakes . . . this so-called ecology is recycle and reuse, wringing dry every drop of

usefulness from the original work. And the trust of the fans has also been challenged in the process of collecting these countless products. Because only the continuation of economic activity that has to do with the original work is the specific proof of 'enduring love'.

And the problem of degeneration of the original material, caused by recycling and reusing, is as meaningless as asking about the quality of recycled paper. Since the buyer is only going on buying due to inertia, the seller will care even less. Just like that, the dynamism of the economy is stimulated; countless fathers feed their families on the income they gain from this. Will anyone question this?

There is money to be earned from re-creation. Re-creation will bring benefit to all kinds of people. If one were to stand up and deny this public welfare, he will suffer the people's condemnation, which would leave behind painful memories. He will lose his friends, lose his sponsors, even losing his wage that he uses to put bread on the table. I, who have understood all this, am already a mature grown-up. I have already learnt to watch for people's moods, to respect the common sense and practices of the industry, to master the traditional virtues of the Japanese that is to smile and say yes.

—Is re-creation a good or a bad thing?

Of course, there is passion poured into this. But even more, it is an economic calculation.

Many sequels have been derived like this, along with many things that profane the original work that are flooding the world.

Walking in downtown Akihabara, I find myself unable to laugh. Surrounded by so many people who have the same interest, what is that negative feeling that is always entrenched in the bottom of my heart? At last, I gave up trying to get to the bottom of it. Mm, I'm not good at holding on to those troublesome things. As compared to single-mindedly thinking very hard, it is still action that is more suited to my temper.

Instead making irresponsible remarks to people, it would be better to make one re-creation that I acknowledge. As compared to those manufacturers, guys who are not involved and only know how to sigh are even more contemptible.

Of course, this is taking a very big risk. Even if one has extreme passion for the original work, if he does not have the skill needed to sustain it and the strength needed to finish it, he will definitely not succeed. And once he fails, the hazard is even more shockingly large. It is not only his reputation that will be damaged; even that which he loves will also be profaned.

But I wrote it anyway.

To me, writing is like raising flowers. Attracted by the beauty of the flowers, this emotion bore fruit in my heart, and scattered its seeds. Precisely because the seeds remained in my chest, I fervently watered and put fertilizer, dreaming of letting the flowers that once had been now bloom again, and let everyone experience its beauty.

I don't actually have any ideals or assertions, nor do I detest the ways of the world; much less do I possess any uniqueness that

merits commendation. It is only that, in my heart there are always seeds that I receive from other people. I like shootout films, wuxia films, science fiction films; I like Transformers, monsters of the universe, and western vengeance shows. Precisely because this love has already almost broken out of my body several times, I chose this profession. This thing that I do—each instance is a re-creation. Since I am like this, then how can I accept that it is denied? If it were possible, I would really like to stick out my chest and cheer loudly for it. Even though this re-creation industry before my eyes is empty of content and does not know the meaning of shame, and parasites run rampant—I still believe that the joy of writing is a noble emotion.

This book of mine, that wasted all of more than one thousand and four hundred pages of paper for the sake of shouting out 'I love *Fate*', is now respectfully set before you.

This is a long and arduous fight. To be honest, I have poured immeasurable effort into this work. But from my perspective, this was all worth it. This is my answer; I hold on to this revelation every moment that I go through the process of creation.

Is re-creation a good or a bad thing? . . . I think that after today I will not be troubled by this again.

I will gamble everything I have, and continue to write pieces that I am pleased with, and I will use this as evidence to deny all negative influence.

In short, it is like this. This is what the process of finishing these four books has taught me.

Suddenly looking back, I, who had once intended to stop writing right here. . . who is to say that I was not saved by this work that is *Fate/Zero?*

Yes, I have derived my answer.

Dear readers, please be at ease. After today I, Urobuchi, will still continue to strive.

Commentary

Nasu Kinoko

This is how his journey ends.

At long last, the journey of an individual who cannot be considered truly vile or evil, only a man with a mundane and ordinary wish as his goal, finally returns to its starting point, and the curtains fall.

Mistakes along every step of the road.

It is already ten years later when the man who did not attain salvation obtains his long-cherished wish.

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"Ahhh—Well done, Urobuchi Gen."

Finished reading all four volumes, I close the book with heavy feelings in my heart and raise my face to the sky before letting out a sincere word of thanks.
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Too cruel. Too heavy. No one reaches salvation at all. But despite these sacrifices, there are still some sparks of light remaining in our hearts.

Creation and destruction are a pair of twins. Everything was swallowed in crimson flames, disappearing with the wind. Yet in the end, a new life budded from a desolate battlefield that should only have been left with infinite sorrow. This light was infinitely small compared to all that had been lost, but it was incomparably nobler as a result. We who can only watch can only feel touched by that light.

I only hope to add a little more value to the story.

Even if he himself did not succeed in the end, the heir to his aspiration will one day appear—

I firmly believe that the readers of this book feel the same as I do —an overwhelming sense of speed and pace.

The end came like an avalanche, raiding us one wave after another. The duels of Heroic Spirits, vivid like screenshots, made us almost forget to breathe. Numerous characters passed away one after another.

The first three volumes were just a warm-up. Urobuchi Gen's ability was finally displayed in all its magnificence in volume four. As you have already experienced, though your heart struggled helplessly under a heavy weight, your hand couldn't help but keep turning pages to read more of the hellish cycle within.

And yet where did this relief and satisfaction come from? Though sorrow lingered within our hearts, not a hint of regret is produced.

A story in which a man failed his great aspiration also has a reason to exist: to show us a strength capable of summoning miracles from the abyss of despair. This strength, which connects the stories that come after it, had been deeply carved into my heart.

With the fourth volume, *Fate/Zero* can no longer be called a side story, but a story that truly connects with canon. Different though their forms of expression may be, if they can support and complement each other, then *Zero* is no longer '0', but could even surpass the fully-developed '1'.

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Let me say one more thing. *Fate/Zero* took place ten years before the PC game *Fate/Stay Night*, describing how a hero of justice began his march. This is a tale that had 'justice', this extremely preposterous 'lip-service' word, as its main plotline. It was truly a tiresome and unrefined story, and Urobuchi Gen made a visual feast out of it.

The novel, *Zero*. The visual novel, *Stay Night*. Two very different forms and styles, and even the authors of the scripts differ. The original author and the author of this book, Urobuchi Gen.

There are a few similarities in interest between them, but deep inside the differences are rather great: style, ideas, areas of

expertise; vegetarianism vs. loving meat, sleep time, and even the preference for girls! Ah, no, the last three had nothing to do with this commentary. No, really.

Zero, written by Urobuchi Gen, was naturally very different from *Stay Night* in terms of style.

However, the essences of both are surprisingly similar.

At the time of *Zero's* publication, most readers were probably filled with anxiety and expectation. Because Urobuchi Gen is an excellent writer, there was always the possibility that he would strike cacophonic chords when he borrowed the world view of another. But as you can see, although the instruments in this performance differed from each other, the pitches of the two worked together in perfect harmony, and a wonderful ensemble was performed.

Here, I want to thank the fact that such a famous performer could come and play the music of *Fate*, and also hope that you enjoyed this miraculous creation. Although I should not express gratitude as the commentator, I would like to take this opportunity to express my utmost gratitude toward Urobuchi Gen.

And I am glad that I've dispelled, if only a little, the anguish in Urobuchi Gen's heart. "I can't immerse myself in work," Urobuchi Gen often told me. According to him, that was the reason why he couldn't successfully keep creating pieces. In my opinion, however, all of this came about because of his unusual ability to calmly and thoroughly analyze and observe literature.

If, for example, I am a diver immersed in the story, he would be the all-seeing nautical analyst on the water's surface testing the

depths. His powers of understanding and analysis would undoubtedly overshadow me, who only knew how to dive beneath the water.

"What is re-creation?" In recent years, Urobuchi Gen has often talked about this concern of his. I respectfully call him older brother, but have often unceremoniously ordered him to do this and that. In my opinion, however, compared to me, he has a particular innocence.

Something happened a while ago. During a press conference to create a cross-media adaptation, Urobuchi Gen had answered:

"~Then again, is it really a good thing to adapt the story, which you wrote after so much work, into an anime or a game? You would only have shown it to the world after you believed it was complete. I hope you consider what would happen if you changed the media. It can only become something completely different, moving further and further away from its original, complete form. I hope you will realize that."

There are a number of "original authors" who, though faintly aware of its wrongness, still bow at the feet of the so-called "joy of expansion." Even if their hearts are suspicious, when faced with their joy and personal modesty, such suspicion seems so insignificant. For this reason, we swallow our questions.

Urobuchi Gen is purely virtuous, pure enough to detect the fact that it will be moving further and further away from its original, complete form. This is almost similar to the virtue of a samurai. And because of this, he would experience the so-called stress of re-creation.

Urobuchi Gen also said this: "Commercial re-creation isn't good. A non-commercial re-creation is good—"

Exactly. In writing *Fate/Zero,* he had not the slightest intention of going commercial, and only wanted to write his ideal *Fate.* That innocent wish was not stained with anything unnecessary or any factors that placated modern trends. Of course, he himself understands better than anyone else that his own way of life is incompatible with modern society.

Would the reader approve of his own particular moral values —?

Fortunately, *Fate* is a critically acclaimed work. It is the support of many readers that helped guide Urobuchi Gen and his beloved *Fate* onto the right path.

No, it should be said that he never went astray. It was perhaps inevitable that *Fate/Zero* became a saga of blood and tears, describing Emiya Kiritsugu's progress in blood. Many people were aware of their own hypocrisy and planned to stop writing thus. Even more people believed in their love of the original, and so chose to continue writing.

I only hope to add a little more value to the story.

Even if he himself did not succeed in the end, the heir to his aspiration will one day appear—

It is easily said, but Nasu Kinoko could not help but feel sad in his heart when he realized that the times when Urobuchi Gen would casually say at 1AM, "How does this sound?" and then recount a series of unexpected plots was coming to an end.

The typeface used almost exclusively throughout this volume is Aldus LT Std, designed by Herman Zapf and published by Adobe Type.

The novel title is set in Palatino LT Std, from the same designer, to which Aldus LT forms a lovely book weight text face companion.

Both typefaces feature letterforms based on the humanist fonts of the Italian Renaissance. The broad-nibbed strokes lend calligraphic grace, and the text proportions make for easy reading at normal distances.

Body text is set at 12pt/16pt, while footnotes are set at 8pt/10pt.